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BOOK I

Conn Iggulden



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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2024

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Set in 13.5/16 pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978-0-241-58732-4

TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-0-241-58733-1

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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[Dedication – To Come]

[Epigraph – To Come]

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PART ONE

AD 37

I

The light was all wrong. With the sun low on the horizon, it was that strange, tainted gold that comes only in the dying hour. Black clouds swelled as if a hand reached over the hills, clawing and flashing with sudden violence. In the last moments before it struck, in the stables, the couple faced one another.

Gnaeus squinted against that sickly sun. He made himself busy with the third horse he had brought out to draw his racing chariot. The first two were snorting, held by the straps and central bar. The whole contraption weighed no more than a child. It was painted black and gold and every part had been made lighter, shaved down by masters. When he whipped those reins and drove the four horses to a gallop, no one in the world could catch him.

The mount was skittish and tried to rear. Gnaeus slapped it hard across the nose. He had no time for its foolishness. They were prey animals, stupid creatures. The horse was afraid of him – right to be if he lost his temper. Gnaeus had to lead it in a tight circle as it skittered and

stepped, refusing to stand alongside the others. Those two were a matched pair, named Castor and Pollux. He had been offered a fortune just to breed from them – and turned it down. The senator he refused had made some comment about his family under his breath. Gnaeus had bedded the fellow's wife a week later. He smiled at the flash of memory, though it was laced with bitterness.

The air was humid and dense with heat. It seemed to press him down, so that his anger grew like the storm clouds. Gnaeus looked at his wife and knew she hated him. Yet somehow he was still expected to die for her.

'Are you not going to speak?' she demanded. 'Let the boy see to your horses. Are you going to Rome or not? If you run, Barbo, you'll kill us both.'

She pressed a hand to the womb they had thought would never fill, that had been empty for nine long years of marriage. He looked where she touched. She twisted him like a rope sometimes.

'Don't call me Barbo,' he muttered. 'That is for my friends.'

As he spoke, he accepted a set of reins from a slave. The third horse had quieted, allowing him to back it into the traces. Gnaeus heaved the straps tight and three mounts nodded and snapped at one another as the fourth was brought out, whinnying, calling. They wanted to run, just as he did.

Gnaeus waved the slave away as he took the last one. He needed no help! He rode every day, as befitted one of his class. Perhaps too, he was aware of ears listening to every word. Half the city seemed to know his business, he thought sourly. Nothing was private. That was another thing Agrippina would not understand.

‘Should I call you “dominus”?’ she asked with deceptive sweetness. ‘Or should I greet you with “Salve, magister”, as my teacher? I was but a child when we met, after all.’

He rounded on her, fast enough to make her flinch. Gnaeus was a man of great physical strength, but he moved with unusual grace. He saw the way she flushed and thought how beautiful she was, how afraid. He grabbed her wrist with his free hand and felt bones move under his grip. He was a soldier, an equite, a wealthy man. Though she was twenty-two years old, there were times when she was still the girl of thirteen her family had given to his.

‘I never asked for you, Agrippina. It was your mother who flattered my family until the milk curdled, as I recall. So play no games with me. Not when you are asking me to go to my death for you. Or you might just find it is a little too much.’

‘Then if you won’t do it for me, do it for the child *in* me.’

She took his hand and moved it onto the swell of her, pressing too hard. There was madness in this woman, he thought. He wondered if the child would even survive its mother. When he felt a kick in the womb, he pulled back with a jerk.

‘You know what will happen, *wife*, if I ride up the Appian way into Rome? You know what Sejanus will do?’

‘I know what he will do if you run,’ she said.

She was very pale. He ached for her arms around him, just once, some sign that she had any affection for him at all. It would surely make it easier. His mother had told him she would grow to love him in time, but that had been false. For all Agrippina was afraid of him, she still treated him with contempt. Gnaeus had lived with neither love

nor kindness from his wife. All his anger was not much comfort in comparison to that.

‘Gnaeus?’ she went on. ‘Sejanus is the emperor’s voice in Rome. If you run, he will declare you outside the law. He will take everything you own: the land, the mines, this house – me. The child and I will have no protection. How long will we last then, with the prefect of Rome as our enemy?’

With quick gestures, Gnaeus put the reins on the last horse. He drew the long strap back to its peg on the chariot. All four horses raised their heads, sensing the chance to run before the storm. There was such power in them, it made his heart race. Gnaeus was ready to leave, and yet he stood there as lightning flashed and thunder sounded to fill the world. He looked up, breathing air that seemed more alive. A breeze was blowing and it felt cooler than it had in weeks. They were certainly due a storm, a cataclysm. The land cried out for it.

‘You know, Agri, I am just a youngest son. I was never in line for anything important. All I am is a grandson of Mark Antony. I race chariots and I oversee my estates, but I don’t threaten men like Sejanus or the emperor. *My* family had wealth and, yes, they wanted to join our line to the divine blood of Augustus, but that was meant to be the end of it! Then Tiberius left for Capreae and this *Sejanus*. . . ?’ He clenched his fist on the reins. ‘Sejanus looked at the few left in his way and began to cut them down.’

‘You don’t know that,’ his wife said.

Gnaeus looked at her in disbelief. He had spoken. That should have been the end of it. Other husbands did not have to put up with insolence. Yet she had to have the last word, always. He rested his forehead on the horse’s

shoulder. Gnaeus was thirty-nine years old. He had married Agrippina when he was thirty, and she had always been a child to him. Perhaps she always would be.

‘Are you honestly so blind?’ he demanded suddenly. ‘Emperor Tiberius only knows what Sejanus lets him know. Do you understand that much? Since the death of his son, that vicious old spider has been lost on his island, withdrawn in grief. There is a great silence in Rome now. And his trusted friend, the beloved “companion in toils” he left in charge – saw his chance and took it. Of *course* Sejanus is responsible for your brothers, Agrippina! He destroyed Nero with an accusation. Is it not strange that such a healthy young man took his own life? Was it the terrible shame Nero felt? You tell me, Agrippina. He was your family, after all. None of you seem to feel shame. I tell you . . .’

He stopped for a moment, unsure if he should go on. The scorn on her face drove him further. He leaned in, his voice dropping. Even in his own house, he had to be careful. Sejanus paid an army of clients, so it was said, all to convey whispers and secrets back to him.

‘Nero was accused of being a woman to other men. Do you think Tiberius cares for that? He is so deep in cruelty . . . Agrippina, I could tell you things that would sicken you. No, if Tiberius signed that order of exile, if he even saw it, it was at the request of Sejanus, driving a competitor out. I heard they let your brother cut his throat, but there was no choice in it, do you understand?’

‘Don’t you dare speak of him,’ she said. She trembled then, but with frustration. Gnaeus was a powerful man, used to frightening those around him with the possibility of violence. She always had to struggle not to show fear in his presence.

He shrugged.

‘I did nothing to your brothers, Agrippina. All I did was take a wife who was cold to me. It is Sejanus who saw a path to power, who made me another stone he could kick out of the way.’

He saw her glance around, looking to see if he was overheard. Gnaeus laughed, suddenly sick of it all.

‘Oh, did I speak too loudly?’ He raised his voice further. ‘Did I say Sejanus has killed your two brothers, one by his own hand, the other starved to death? The third one might have been next if he hadn’t vanished – for his own safety, I am certain. What was his name? Yes! Gaius Julius Caesar. Like Nero Caesar and Drusus Caesar. I wonder if it ever occurred to your mother that she named them all to be killed. And then *I* am accused! Of adultery with a senator’s wife, as if half of Rome are not scratching at each other’s doors every night. Sejanus attacks you through me with his accusation. I will be put to trial and sent, where, to the island of Pontia to starve, or to Capreae, perhaps, to be made a whore for Tiberius? Or just given a knife and told to do the job in my cell? That’s what he wants. Or perhaps he *wants* me to run. Sejanus is killing his way to power, Agrippina. If you can’t see it, I can! That is what you are asking of me! *If I ride into Rome, I am riding to my death.*’

He was shouting the last, battering words at her so that she leaned back and closed her eyes. The storm breeze too pressed at her, flicking her hair. Gnaeus felt he had almost raised the gale himself. He was breathing hard, as if he had run a race.

Agrippina stepped in closer, right into range of his fists, her voice a whip.

‘You always talk of duty, Gnaeus, of the father of the

house being responsible for everyone within it. Well, that is your role. If you had not been so free with the wives of senators and consuls, perhaps Sejanus would have no nails from which to hang you. So do not come to me for forgiveness or sympathy. You have shown none to me.'

'You cold-hearted bitch,' he hissed. 'When did you ever welcome me to your bed? When have you opened your legs without being forced, without me demanding my right as a husband? Then you lie there like a dead fish until I am done? You head back to your room as if nothing has happened? For nine *years*, that is all I have had from you. By the gods, I should have known you would be twisted. Can you even love at all? Your father was murdered, your mother humiliated in the streets, beaten so hard she lost an eye. I've never seen you weep, Agrippina, not for them, not for your brothers. You're like a stone. So if I found a little warmth with normal women, with appetites as great as my own . . .'

She slapped him, suddenly and without warning, as if she had not known herself that she would. He might have ducked or stopped a punch from a man, but she had surprised him. It was a hard blow that knocked his head to the side. He moved in a blur then, raising one fist like a club.

Agrippina staggered, fearing he would kill her. Her foot caught and she fell onto the stones, landing hard, crying out in pain.

Gnaeus looked down on the young woman who carried his child, still aflame in his anger. He had *never* hit her, not once in a decade of marriage. She was half his size and weight and he was a soldier who had killed men, in battle and violent dispute. He had torn the eye from one equite who argued with him – and thought nothing of it. He had

strangled another to death with his bare hands when that man refused to honour a bet. Yet he had never hit a woman.

Agrippina rose to her feet slowly, clumsily. She had paled even further and Gnaeus was suddenly sick of all her winces and spite. The storm cracked overhead and he saw fat drops falling into the dust, the rain beginning to drum in from the south. It would be a downpour. He could smell it on the air. He filled his lungs and stepped onto the chariot platform.

‘If you run,’ she said again, ‘Sejanus will kill the child in me. Your child.’

He looked down at the way she stood, one hand supporting her womb. In nine years of marriage she had never held him as tightly as she held herself. Even then, she was manipulating him. She knew Gnaeus prided himself on his courage, that he held the name of coward as the worst a man could be called. He could not run, but by the gods, it hurt to give his life for one such as her. He wanted to live.

As he took a grip on the reins, the team whinnied, prancing on wet stones. They wore iron plates on their hooves, held by straps and grooves cut into each one. The sound was a clatter of knives. Gnaeus took his balance, ready. He felt strong.

‘What are you going to do?’ Agrippina called.

He shook his head like a twitch, sick of her voice. If he had married another, he would not be there, called on trumped-up charges into Rome. If she had not carried his child, he could have divorced her, but now they were bound. He found himself hoping the child would die, so he could be free.

Lost in fury, sick at himself, he turned the chariot almost

in its own length, dominating the quad with easy skill. He knew she would be watching to see which way he went, north to the city . . . or south, to live without honour, to abandon his wife and child.

Gnaeus didn't look back as he passed through the gate and went out to the road. The rain suddenly intensified, battering the ground and all those under it. He was drenched in an instant, his clothes sodden, rain plastering his blond hair to his head.

He did not see the red line that crept down the inside of her leg, or the way it mingled with rain and made it pink, so that Agrippina stood in blood. Something had torn as she fell and the pain was growing and already terrible. Yet she remained there, watching, knowing she could not leave. Gnaeus held her fate in his hands – and the fate of the child growing inside like a tumour. For all his anger and stupidity, she was almost sure which way he would go. That last, trembling lack of certainty held her, like a nail through the heart.

On the road, Gnaeus snapped the reins and roared. The line of animals sprang forward, the tiny chariot lurching off as if it had been released from a bow. Iron hooves sparked in the gloom and he was gone, heading to the city.

Agrippina collapsed then, crying out when Gnaeus could not hear, when he could not be there to lift her in his arms and lavish all the care that made her skin creep. Slaves from the house came rushing out in response. They sheltered her beneath blankets while others helped her inside and still more summoned the physician.

'Bring the midwife,' Agrippina hissed at them. 'The child is coming.'

She felt a great shudder take its grip and she was certain.

Lightning flashed again and again overhead, followed by thunder so loud they all jumped from the sheer power of it. She prayed Gnaeus had the strength to do what honour said he must. It was out of her hands. Agrippina was taken inside, to face her own trial.

Rain lashed the road as the quadriga chariot raced the storm. Lightning crashed over and over, whitening the entire sky with a skein of threads. Gnaeus could feel the thunder on his skin, he realised in awe.

The speed was dangerous on those stones. If he turned the chariot over, he knew he would be lucky to survive. At least the road was empty. Gnaeus felt he was the only man in the world, lost in a sort of madness where he saw every heave of the horses and felt his own heart beating.

He balanced on a tiny floor of painted wood, while his four horses tore through an artificial twilight. Each one infected the others with fear, so that they ran as if they were chased by lions, eyes wide, spittle flung like sea froth.

He passed huddled families on the side of the road. They stared at the madman, galloping in thunder and lightning. Gnaeus caught the flash of eyes as they turned, but he did not slow. He felt immortal. When had he ever run from a fight? From any man? For one who rode towards death, the air was sweet. He felt no pain in that moment, no ache of sorrow or ageing joints. All fears and worries were left in his wake and he was young again. He went like an arrow, and for a time he was lost in the joy of it.

Through the downpour, he knew the city by its light. The walls were manned by praetorians in all weathers. Oil lamps burned over gatehouses and all along the crest, like

fireflies. Gnaeus smiled to see it. There was the city he loved, the order he needed.

It brought fear too. The strange peace that had filled him slid away like mists. The lights of the city meant strength and laws and praetorians standing watch. They also meant the end of his journey.

A man of Gnaeus' class could do whatever he wanted in Rome, right up to the moment of an accusation. That was all it took sometimes. Once they had him, Gnaeus knew he would never be free again. He began to curse and swear, trying to damn them all to Hades and eternal torment, every last one of them. Shouting tore through the last of his control. He howled for a time as the city grew before him.

His horses were running hot, steaming in the rain. Gnaeus detected a hitch in the gait of one and raged about that. Lamé on the hard ground, of course. His fault, his fault, always his. He could imagine what Agrippina would say when she heard he had been so reckless. She was always telling him to *think*, as if he could somehow see what the day would bring before it came crashing down upon them.

He showed his teeth as the quad continued, slowing, the sound of their hooves like battle. He was not stupid, whatever she said. By the gods, how his life had twisted under him! He'd never even wanted to get married. Why would he, when women welcomed him so readily to their beds? They saw his blond hair and wide shoulders and, whether they were married or not, they whispered promises to make a satyr blush.

His mother had insisted, he recalled. The old woman had wanted a grandson and she'd arranged the union with the daughter of a good bloodline. The great-granddaughter of Augustus, his precious wife.

Gnaeus shook his head, wiping rain from his eyes. He had expected a docile little thing to bear him a brace of sons and perhaps a daughter to look after him in his old age. Instead, she'd come into his life like a polecat, all claws and fury.

He'd tried to train a vixen pup once, when he was just a boy. The estate slaves had dug out a burrow and killed the mother. Gnaeus had snatched up one wriggling little thing before they could put a spade through it. Foxes were so much like dogs, he'd thought he could tame her with food and discipline. He winced at the memory. It had cost him the tip of one finger and given him a scar that curled from elbow to wrist.

Agrippina reminded him of that little fox. Sleek and dangerous, beautiful . . . but when those dark eyes turned on you, you had to shiver just a little. He never knew what she was thinking.

The rain had settled to a drizzle. The gap between thunder and lightning seemed greater, which meant it was moving off. He was grateful for that, especially when he saw the queue of drenched travellers waiting to enter. Some fool even waved at him, shouting for him to slow down. Gnaeus made him jump clear before he was crushed, laughing as he went. A Roman summoned to his own death didn't have to follow petty rules, not one. It was a strange thought and he found himself smiling. He was Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus! He was Barbo, of the races! They had chanted his name once, a long time ago.

He ran a hand through his hair, smoothing it back. Ahead, a child ran into the road. Gnaeus had time to judge the ragged clothes the boy wore. He caught a flash of a

woman shrieking, her hands held out. She reminded him of Agrippina and he made a choice, edging the horses in.

Hooves struck the child and broke him, even before the chariot wheel flung him like a bundle of rags. Gnaeus heard the woman's wail beginning and he clenched his jaw, sick of pain and grief and stupid people who let their children wander into danger.

He dismounted by the gate to the city. An equite did not have to wait with shit-covered farmers and messengers. Gnaeus nodded to the praetorian guard. The man looked back at the woman weeping over her son, pointing in his direction. The two exchanged a glance and Gnaeus shrugged. It didn't matter.

'Prefect Sejanus sent for me. I am Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus.'

A crowd had gathered around the dead child. More and more were pointing at Gnaeus, jabbing the air.

'You'd better come in, sir. They're working themselves up to a riot. Like children, all of them.'

Gnaeus chuckled. A sense of peace and purpose settled on him. He could face his fate with dignity. After all, he was home, amongst his own.

2

Tiberius looked out through slender iron bars, curling his fingers through the gaps. Flames burned in braziers around him, burnishing images of Jupiter overhead. The temples of the Arx citadel were quiet at that hour. After the storm, the entire city seemed at peace, though as he looked out on the forum, he knew that was a lie. From that height, Tiberius could not hear the rustlings of his people. Yet they were there, working and sleeping and rutting and eating and killing one another. He smiled at the thought. In that great darkness, there was both good and evil, but he was above it all. It was an image of the imperium that pleased him.

Tiberius glanced back at the one who waited in chains on polished stone, head bowed in submission.

‘Do you know why we call this place the “Capitoline” hill, Sejanus?’ the emperor said.

He turned from the window. A pad of silk was in his other hand and Tiberius pressed it to his mouth, breathing thick scent. The folded cloth was drenched in a mixture of

rose oil and myrrh. His breath had soured over the previous year, some symptom of age or rot within. He could not bear the odour of decay and so he breathed through the cloth as another might have taken a sip of wine. It left a slight sheen on his skin.

The one who knelt before him did not answer on the instant. Sejanus was still thinking, still wondering if there was a way he might survive. It was delightful, in its way. Tiberius felt his senses rousing as he recalled memories of Capreae. Hope was such a fluttering, desperate thing, in men and women, free or slave. Right to the last, even through the moment of the last, they dared to hope they might be saved, that he would relent. It was his greatest joy, he sometimes thought. To kindle that hope, to watch it flare to life with hints and bargains, then snuff it out while they writhed under him. He tried to look into their eyes then, to get as close as he could – to see if they died hoping, or if they gave it up, setting free the winged creature he had brought to life. By the gods, he loved them, in all their childish ways. Even Sejanus . . .

‘Come, Sejanus, you still have your tongue. Can there be no peace between us? Will you force me to be your judge?’

The man looked up and Tiberius felt his old heart trip in excitement. There it was, the desperate hope, against all reason and experience. He *knew* the man would speak, before Sejanus moved, before his chains clinked against the marble floor. It was almost spoiled when Tiberius felt a cough rising in his chest. He clenched down on it, watching Sejanus breathe in, but no, it had to come, coarse and too loud, ruining the moment.

Tiberius wiped his mouth when it had passed, angry at his own weakness. He could smell blood, he realised.

When his gums seeped, he could taste it, but that had become a common thing. Tonight, he could smell it as well, a dark malodour. Had blood always smelled like that? It was an image of corruption, as if all men were filled with a seeping, musty liquid. He could not bear the thought . . .

Tiberius closed his eyes in relief as Sejanus spoke at last. The voice was hoarse but still strong. It sent a delicious shiver through the emperor, like a cat's tongue on his skin.

'I have heard the name,' Sejanus said. 'Capitolinus was a consul . . . or a tribune? He defended the city.'

'Indeed he did, Sejanus! You are an extraordinary man, I have always said it. Yes – an age ago, with Rome still bloody from the womb. Mind you, the man was named for the hill, did you know that? Capitolinus was born in a house here. The *original* name, from the very beginning, was from when our ancestors dug the first foundations and discovered a stone head. What forgotten, ancient race left it there?' Tiberius smiled in wonder.

'Capitolinus was a hero of the Republic, beloved of the people he championed. And yet he reached too far . . . At the end, his house was torn down, stone from stone, Sejanus. The temple of Juno rose on the very spot, not forty paces from here. No one prays there now and thinks of him. Is that not strange? A *name* can be immortal and yet the *memory* of the man, all that name really means? Gone like dust.'

Tiberius walked over to stand before the one he had called friend. His guards shifted in the shadows around him, along with the one he had brought as witness. They knew Sejanus had been searched, that chain links still

bound him. Yet they sought to show their readiness with a creak of leather and iron. Tiberius smiled as he walked half a dozen steps and looked down on his prisoner. Men were such simple creatures. He had opened enough to know.

Tiberius reached out, taking Sejanus by the jaw and turning his face back and forth. The man had been beaten, or just knocked around in his arrest. The full lips had split and there was a lump by one eye. Tiberius looked down in sympathy. His guards were thorough.

‘Your praetorians have a new prefect, old friend. I appointed Naevius Macro.’ He saw Sejanus wince and raised one hand, as if they were discussing a colleague or some trivial thing. ‘I know! He has no imagination, Sejanus. Twenty years fighting fires with the vigiles, the man seems to smell of smoke and ash. Yet he is a loyal dog. That is what matters most.’

‘I have not betrayed you . . .’ Sejanus said.

He raised his head and tried to hold the gaze of the terrifying old man peering down at him. There was too much knowledge between them. Tiberius coughed again and dabbed at his mouth, leaving a gleam of oil and blood mixed in a smear.

‘I called you friend, Sejanus. I don’t have many of those. In truth, I don’t have any, not really. Men look to me for favours, or they will not meet my gaze, for fear of what I might do – to them, or their wives and children. They laugh when I want them to, frown when I warn them of the future. It is all false and no real friendship. Can you understand? I see the way they laugh with their mates and I really cannot experience it, not in the same way, not with their innocence, do you see?’

He reached down and kissed Sejanus on one cheek, then the other. He could feel the man trembling and felt his heart thump faster. Nothing was good or true any longer, Tiberius knew that. Apart from vengeance. That could fall on a man with all the simple truth of a millstone.

‘I did not intend to come back, Sejanus. I’m old and some sickness bites at me, worse each day. Anyway, Capreae is my home now, not this city. You should have seen it, old friend. The view from those cliffs is extraordinary, with the colour of the sea changing every day, every hour! I had everything I needed there. And a son to inherit in Rome – a bloodline.’

He blinked for a moment as grief gleamed in his eyes. That too could be real, an ember rolled out of ashes within.

‘I would have lived my last days there if my son had survived. My only boy. He had so much passion! You fought with him, didn’t you, Sejanus? You fell out and disagreed a dozen times.’ He waved a hand at the fear he saw in the man’s eyes. ‘Oh, I was not blind and deaf on my island. I kept a few eyes watching you both – I still do. I tell you, when he died, I sent my little mice into every dark corner, searching and listening, making sure it was just the gods taking a soul and a father’s love out of the world . . . nothing else. He was thirty-seven, Sejanus, do you see? In the prime of his life and health. Can you blame me for wondering? Men have such dark souls. Yet in the end . . . my beloved boy was taken by a fever in the night.’

He paused, aware of every subtle movement Sejanus made. Tiberius alone knew how the evening would end. He drank the man like a cup of Falernian, with the same effect of making his senses swim.

‘I grieved, as any father would. I tore my hair and drank

and vomited it all up, until I was entirely empty. I could have died then, uncaring – and without my son, the imperial line would have passed to the children of another. You know their names, Sejanus, do you not? I'm sure you do. Nero? A fine young quaestor, but accused of rutting with other men. I think there was an order for a year in exile, wasn't there? You thought it wise to remind a young member of the nobilitas of his responsibilities. I agreed. The common people don't understand such things, Sejanus! Not like us. They might respect one who gives, but not one who receives, not one who is made a woman. Poor Nero. I wrote to him in exile, did you know? I wanted him to understand he could not rule Rome and yet kneel for other men. Poor boy. It seems he could not overcome his choices. His shame was such that he took his own life.'

Tiberius was watching Sejanus as he spoke. The man returned his gaze steadily. Yet that too might be a confession. An innocent man would not have realised he was suspected, would have hung his head or blinked. Tiberius cursed himself for his inattention. He had been blind and deaf, after all.

'Then, Sejanus, his brother too is accused! Drusus, who threw himself at the wife of a senator, forced her in her own private rooms.' He chuckled. 'Though I wonder if it was "forced" only after the husband heard the gossip, you know? Did you read those reports, Sejanus? She said she thought he was her husband in the dark, after a drunken party. A clever tale.'

Tiberius took the head of his friend in both hands, tilting it as if for a kiss. The square of perfumed silk released a dribble of oil down Sejanus' cheek.

'I could have saved him, of course, but I received

reports that he was plotting to remove me! He was twenty-five and perhaps too impatient to inherit. Ah, Sejanus, how impetuous the young can be! Do you even remember being twenty-five?’

‘Dominus, please . . .’ Sejanus tried.

Tiberius didn’t seem to hear and carried on, forcing him to stop talking. No one spoke over the emperor.

‘I was a long way from Rome, Sejanus, lost in my art and sports. I wish now that I had summoned you to me there. I would have made you dance, Sejanus. I would have made you *sing*.’

There was an ugly note in the old man’s voice then. It turned into a cough that went on and on. When Tiberius released his head, Sejanus looked away rather than see the man’s weakness, the one who would decide his fate on the slightest whim.

Tiberius staggered as white lights flashed across his vision. He saw one of the shadows move. His witness. The emperor held out his palm, stopping the younger man as if he had been driven into the floor.

‘I’m all right, dear boy! Just a passing thing. I will be well again soon, with the best doctors in Rome to tend me.’

He threw aside the square of red silk. It landed with a slap on the marble and a slave approached to offer another, already doused in the pungent oils.

‘I put my seal to that order myself, Sejanus. Drusus Julius Caesar was to be imprisoned on the Palatine, over there, for two years. Yet he was so hurt by his treatment, so dishonoured, that he refused food. He starved to death in those cells.’

Tiberius leaned in closer than before. Sejanus could smell rotting teeth and something even worse on his breath.

‘I investigated, Sejanus. I had his guards snatched up and tortured. Do you think they named you?’

‘They could not have done, dominus. I am loyal.’

‘Yes, they made no mention of you. But there was a detail that bothered me, that ate away at me like the lumps in my groin and stomach that will not seal when they are lanced. My doctor examined his body, so very thin, his skin stretched over his bones. Do you know what he found in the dear boy’s stomach?’

Sejanus shook his head.

‘Straw, Sejanus, packed in like a cow’s cud. That was the worm in the fruit that took me out to the galley waiting on my command at Capreae. My son may just have been a tragedy, and perhaps Nero was a life lost to despair . . . but a man trying to starve himself to death does not eat his own mattress.’

There was silence for a time. Tiberius wiped a smear of oil across his lips. They had grown sore and a little swollen.

‘Suspicion, suspicion, suspicion . . .’ Tiberius whispered, the sound carrying horribly over the flutter of flames. ‘Oh, it is a foul thing, once it enters in. I set my little mice to watch you, Sejanus, to listen to you. They told me of statues raised in your own likeness, of fortunes from my treasury to celebrate your birthday. You took on the graces of an emperor, Sejanus, though you were merely my voice in Rome. Tell me honestly, is it just that I was away for too many years? Did you think I would not hear, or that I would not care if I did?’

‘You have judged me guilty, though I am not,’ Sejanus said. ‘Why then should I speak?’

Tiberius chuckled.

‘You *are* guilty, Sejanus, but there are endings and endings. When Capitolinus took on the honours of a king, he was thrown to his death from the Tarpeian rock – from this very spot, Sejanus. He fell from this cliff to break on the stones far below. I could do something like that, or have you hanged, impaled . . . By the gods, there are so many ways. Or I could have you strangled, left whole in death. It takes a little longer, but it means your wife and your children – how are they, Sejanus? Are they well? – it means they can bury you in honour . . . and not in pieces.’

He smiled at his own humour. He had kindled a little hope and then smothered it. To see it fade, to see resignation grow in the eyes of one he had trusted, was a joy.

‘Come to me now, Gaius,’ Tiberius called, without looking away. ‘You must see this.’

Tiberius did not break his gaze from Sejanus as the steps approached. In the last instant, the kneeling prefect glanced at the newcomer. Very slim and dark-haired, the young man had vanished from the city two years before. Sejanus had searched far and wide for news of him. He slumped in his chains and Tiberius clapped his hands in delight.

‘You didn’t know! I’d hoped you would not, but of course I couldn’t be sure. I thought you would have your own ears and eyes in Capreae, that they would report back. I had the third son, Sejanus, safe and at my side. Gaius has become my favourite.’

Sejanus looked into the eyes of the young man and shuddered at what he saw. Gaius Caesar Germanicus was trembling like a whipped dog. The young man was scarred, Sejanus saw. His face was marked with strange whorls and lines, and his arms too had been scored with a blade.

Tiberius may have saved his life by taking him to Capreae, but he had not come back whole. A single glance confirmed that. Sejanus looked away as Tiberius frowned, not understanding his reaction.

‘I saved him, Sejanus! When my own son passed, when the others died in such mysterious ways, I brought Gaius out and made him mine. An emperor plans, does he not? He looks to the future and he twists and bends it to his will. And if he must, he unroots the weed growing in the garden, before it smothers all the little blooms.’

‘You will not believe I am innocent?’ Sejanus said.

Tiberius laughed and shook his head.

‘I would be a fool if I did. Too many have died, Sejanus, while you rose and rose and forgot you owe everything to me, that everything can be taken from you. I should have you tortured, I really should, to hear all the details, all the sordid plots and games. Yet truly . . . we were friends once.’

He spoke for the benefit of his companion, reaching out to rub the young man’s shoulders.

‘Do you see, Gaius? I can offer Sejanus mercy now. In honour of what lay between us before.’

The young man nodded and Sejanus sagged, staring at the floor.

‘Do you know the Greek word “krisis”?’ Tiberius asked softly. ‘There are some in Rome who use it now to mean disaster or . . . catastrophe. That is not what it means. No, it means to decide – the moment of choice. So, Sejanus, I offer you the chance to confess your sins and be strangled, or I will call my torturers and they will work on you until I am satisfied. This is the crisis, Sejanus. Choose.’

There was something like defiance in the eyes of the man in chains then, just for a moment. Tiberius saw it and

smiled, leaning closer to hear what spite might bring from his lips. Instead, he saw Sejanus sigh, deflating. Tiberius almost withdrew his offer in his disappointment.

‘Very well,’ Sejanus said softly. ‘I confess as you direct, dominus. I played my part in the deaths . . .’ Sejanus hesitated, but a man could not step off a cliff and then change his mind. He was already falling. ‘It was at my order that Nero took his own life. I denied food to his brother in prison. I dreamed of being first in Rome, yes, a prize worth a little blood. It was no more than any man would have done. There, you have the truth of it.’

‘There . . .’ Tiberius echoed. He leaned down and kissed Sejanus on the cheeks once more, as if in farewell. ‘You see, Gaius? He is a man of courage, even in the end. Take him out to the Gemonian stairs. My men will do what needs doing.’

‘Now?’ Sejanus said, his voice cracking. ‘I had hoped to be given the chance to write letters, to see my wife and children.’

‘I have come a long, long way,’ Tiberius said. ‘I am weary from travel and I need to sleep. Gaius here needs to rest. Come, do not make a fuss. My personal guard is a man of great strength. He will make it quick.’

Legionaries appeared out of the shadows on either side of the kneeling man, heaving him to his feet. Sejanus wavered, trying to summon courage but looking around for anything that might save him. Tiberius hid a smile with his perfumed cloth. Hope. It endured.

The soldiers took Sejanus out of the temple and across the Capitoline hill. The Gemonian stairs were an ancient site, where traitors were killed and then thrown down for the mob to batter and stab. Torches had been lit there and

the light had drawn a crowd, even in the small hours. Tiberius and Gaius walked behind, strolling like lovers under the moonlight.

Sejanus looked over his shoulder, terror growing in him.

‘You don’t have to . . . please, Tiberius. We were friends once.’

Tiberius raised both hands, as if helpless. He leaned in then and whispered into the ear of the young man at his side. Sejanus saw Gaius flinch from the words.

‘Show clemency, one of you,’ Sejanus called. ‘It is in your gift. Let me go into exile, Tiberius! Take all I have, but let me live.’

The guards dragged him across the crest of the hill, to the top of the stairs. The lamps illuminated those ancient steps, down to pools of darkness by the forum. Brutus and Cassius had walked those very stones, holding up their bloody hands to show what they had done.

The waiting crowd caught sight of the emperor above. They called to one another and to Tiberius himself, blessing him for his presence in the city. Others began to cheer as the news spread. Tiberius was in Rome. The emperor was with them.

‘Please,’ Sejanus said. He focused on the younger man. Tiberius was beyond any appeal he might make. Yet his companion would be emperor one day – if he survived the withered old spider clinging to his arm. ‘I knew your father, Gaius. Can you not ask for mercy? Tiberius will grant you anything as his heir. Can *you* not spare me?’

To his surprise, the young man gave a strange and high-pitched laugh. It sounded almost like weeping.

‘You killed my brothers,’ Gaius said. ‘If I had the strength, I would crush your throat myself.’

‘*Dear* boy, well said,’ Tiberius murmured warmly. ‘There is purity in justice, as in little else.’

He nodded to the guard and the man stepped forward and put both hands around Sejanus’ throat. Sejanus made an animal sound of panic, drowned out by the crowd’s excited roar. Their eyes gleamed in torchlight below. Some of them had crept up the first steps, knives ready, waiting for the body.

Sejanus had been first sword of the praetorian guard. He was strong and very fit, a man still in his prime. It took a long time before the last sign of life was wrenched from him. The guard kept squeezing until he felt a crack. He was satisfied then. The man turned back to Tiberius and the emperor waved a hand as he coughed blood into his red cloth.

The guard kicked the body down the steps, watching in fascination as it bounced and slid into the arms of the mob. They fell on it in a kind of frenzy, hammering and stabbing until there was blood all over them.

Tiberius left them to their pleasures for a while, then sent his men down to retrieve the corpse of his friend. The crowd scattered before those grim and armoured soldiers, pulling back in a ring and cheering for the emperor returned.

At the foot of the Gemonian stairs, Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus looked up in awe. Tiberius had returned to Rome after a dozen years away. Gnaeus had recognised Sejanus and then watched the man thrown down like a sack of wheat. Blood spattered the bottom of the steps and Gnaeus could feel only a sort of stunned joy. Surely, the accusations would have died with Sejanus? His enemy

had encountered a greater force than himself and been crushed by it.

Gnaeus wanted to roar his delight, his triumph, but he knew better. The crowd was still savage, pushing and shoving, with blood on their knives. Gnaeus knew he should just leave, go quietly back to the stables where he had left his chariot and four. He'd have to find another horse to replace the one that had gone lame, but if he waited till first light . . .

He looked up the stairs at Tiberius and a young man who stood at his side. He knew him, Gnaeus realised. Gaius Caesar, older brother to Agrippina. The boy had survived! Gnaeus remembered him as a skinny little urchin, brave and cocky, with a ready grin. Some legion blacksmiths had made the child a set of legionary armour, right down to a miniature sword and boots just like the caligae the soldiers wore. The boy had been delighted, strutting around the camp as if he owned it. They'd called him 'little boots' then, Gnaeus recalled. Caligula.

He eased back through the crowd, away from the light. He had to tell Agrippina. She would know what to do; she always did.

3

The storm had passed in the night, but Agrippina was still in bonds, enduring wave after wave, the awful clenching she could neither refuse nor slow, yet which produced nothing but pain. It had not been too bad in the first hours, but by the time the sun showed, she was exhausted, limp. Yet still they came, her little body squeezing as if she had no command of it.

She sat on the birthing chair the midwife had brought. The woman had made a shrine of the room, burning herbs that made her senses swim. Yet the chair was the strangest thing, with a great arc cut into the seat so the child could slip down and out. Agrippina braced her back against oak worn smooth by all those who had sat there before. She saw blood trickling and the midwife looked sour once again.

The woman had suggested cutting her, had actually brought out a wicked little blade for the task. Agrippina had been grateful then for her sister. Drusilla had taken the older woman by the arm and gently removed the knife

from her hand. Of course, something had split below not long after that, with bright red blood appearing on the polished wood. The midwife had been unable to hide her satisfaction as she peered at her poor torn flesh.

Agrippina closed her eyes, shutting out the room. She had been offered wine, but it made her feel ill and the room still spun from the effect of a single cup. She needed the older woman, no matter how irritating she was. It was all new! Agrippina had not given birth before and Drusilla had no children of her own, though she had been married for four years.

‘It’ll come now, no doubt,’ the midwife said. ‘With that great tear to ease the way. Poor little thing couldn’t get out before. There, you see? The head is already coming more easily. Push down again, dear.’

Agrippina could hear liquid spattering. She was dizzy and saw flashing lights. She felt something leave her, as well as a tearing inside. It was not a sharp pain but an ache, as if she had been hollowed out.

The midwife caught the child in a bundle of cloth. Agrippina stared dazedly, blinking.

‘It is a boy,’ the midwife said, raising him up.

The tiny figure opened its mouth and the head turned back and forth, though the eyes were still shut. Agrippina felt a terrible weariness. She wanted to move to the bed, but the child was still attached somehow, held by a thick blue cord with bumps and twists all along its length. She waved her hand to it, unable to form the words. The midwife understood. She bent down and bit through the flesh, causing a rush of blood that dribbled down her chin. Agrippina looked at her in horror, then reached to hold the slithering thing that suddenly appeared between her

legs, convinced her bowels had emptied. She found herself holding what looked like a mass of liver, too slippery to grip. It was warm and it pulsed in her hands. Agrippina let it drop in horror.

‘What is that thing?’

‘Just the afterbirth, dear, don’t worry,’ the midwife said, visibly amused at young women who knew so little. She wrapped the child and used rags to wipe spilled blood while Drusilla helped her sister over to the bed. Agrippina lay on her back then, torn and aching, staring at the ceiling. She did not protest when her legs were opened once more and the midwife tutted at whatever she found.

‘I can stitch you together, dear, but it will hurt. Better to do it now, before you sleep. Or you’ll be mixing pee and . . . well, I’ve known women who are never right again for their husbands.’

Agrippina remembered being angry before. The midwife seemed a more benevolent sort then, a kind and gentle creature.

‘Do what you must. Where is my son?’

She said the words almost to test them, sounds she had never needed to say before, never thought she would say after nine barren years of marriage. Yet they were right, the moment she heard them. Drusilla handed her a wrapped thing and Agrippina could see the envy in her sister as her hand lingered on his little body. She looked down into a red and swollen face, about as battered in his beginning as she felt herself. She slipped down the bed as the midwife shoved a bolster under her hips and went to work with a needle. She had produced it from a leather pouch with a great flourish. Agrippina tried not to gasp as it pierced her flesh and the midwife began to sew the tear

together in looping stitches. The little boy fussed and began to snuffle.

‘Give him your breast,’ Drusilla said.

There were tears in her eyes, Agrippina noticed. She reached out and took her sister’s hand, gripping it in silent reassurance. The whole family had thought they were barren, but if one could have a son, perhaps there was still a chance for the other. The two young women met one another’s gaze and Drusilla nodded, pulling herself together. She glanced at what was happening between Agrippina’s knees and paled a few shades, looking quickly away. Agrippina could feel new pain there and tightness, overwhelming the numbness that had protected her. She winced, bearing one breast and pressing the baby’s face to it. She didn’t know if there was a knack, but the child found her nipple and began to suck greedily. His eyes drifted half open and she looked into them in wonder. She saw his hand work free of the wrapping then and marvelled at it.

‘He is perfect,’ she said.

She looked up then as a clatter sounded outside. She knew the voice calling orders to house slaves, demanding to know where she was. Her husband could do nothing in peaceful calm. He swore and shouted his way through life. He kicked doors and often broke them, as if the entire world was just a little too slow for his taste. Agrippina knew the sound of him and yet it came with a wave of fear that threatened to drown all her joy. If he had come home, it meant Sejanus had not taken him up for trial or imprisonment. It meant his nerve had failed and he had killed them all.

When Gnaeus came into that room, he brought the

odour of earth and rain, his clothes the same he had worn the evening before and yet sodden with damp. He looked down on the scene as the midwife squawked and covered up his wife's lower half. The ludicrousness of it might have made Agrippina smile if the situation hadn't been so serious. Yet her husband was grinning as he stood there, looking around at the chaos of a birthing room with sudden grimaces flashing across his face.

'It's like a battlefield in here,' he announced. 'Which makes you the victors, I hope.' He nodded to her sister, giving the most reduced greeting manners demanded. 'Drusilla.'

'Barbo,' she replied.

He ignored her.

'Well? Which is it? Boy or girl?'

'A son,' Agrippina said.

He beamed then.

'Good. I'll teach him to hunt and fight. I'm just about young enough – though you cut it close. My goodness, he's right on that tit though, isn't he? He's *loving* that! Look at him! Takes after his father. Well done. Not that I'd have minded a girl – but women aren't . . . you know, real, are they? Oh, you know what I mean! They're different. Don't look like that, Agri! I know you have your own ways. All the talk and . . . herbs and such, but you're not like men are. No, you *make* boys, which is a noble path. Obviously, we're the ones who think . . . who fight wars and build the cities! Then women make more so we can keep it going.' He had the sense of all three women frowning at him. 'Oh, by the gods, take a compliment, Agri! You weren't really a woman before, is what I mean. Like Drusilla here.'

There was a clash of voices then as both sisters snapped

at him. He raised his hands in mock surrender, his fine mood untouched.

‘Well! You are both obviously exhausted. Get some sleep, Agrippina. I’ll leave you to it.’

‘What about *Sejanus*?’ Agrippina shouted, over her sister’s acid reply. ‘Why are you back here?’

Gnaeus laughed then, shaking his head in a sort of wry wonder.

‘Sejanus? Oh, he’s dead. Strangled and thrown down the Gemonian steps. I was there, Agri. I watched it. Your brother was there too.’

‘What? What are you talking about?’

‘Tiberius has come back. It seems he thought Sejanus was doing just what I told you he was. Well, he put a stop to it. I never thought I’d see that old wolf in Rome again. Neither did Sejanus, looks like. Cost him his life, but I think . . . I *think* it means the case against me has gone like seeds on the wind. I’m not sure, but I’ll stay away from the city for a while and let Tiberius settle in. He doesn’t look well, though. I’ll say that much. He was coughing into a bit of cloth as the mob tore into Sejanus. What? He was already dead. You should have seen the size of the strangler’s hands, Agri. I tell you, they were like shovels. They met right round the front like a collar. No, he was dead, all right.’

Agrippina could see her husband was in the grip of one of his wild spells. They came upon him sometimes, building and building until words poured in a torrent and he would not sleep for days. They were followed by a great crash, of misery, rage and shame, unable even to rise. She was not sure which of the two sides she disliked the most, not really. They were both exhausting and the entire world

became about him. If his mother had indeed made a ‘real’ person, she had not done a very good job.

‘What about my brother?’ Agrippina asked weakly. She was barely able to keep her eyes open, a fact of which he seemed utterly oblivious.

‘Caligula?’

‘Don’t call him that. It is a child’s name.’

‘Gaius, then. He was there. On the arm of the emperor like his favourite catamite,’ Gnaeus said with a shrug. ‘He looked thin, but all right. I wasn’t close enough to speak to him. As soon as I saw Sejanus was for it, I thought I should just quietly take myself away from the city. So I came home and found a son, at last. I tell you, the gods smiled on us last night, didn’t they? I’m going to break out the good wine and take the day for myself. To think of a name for him as well.’

‘I’d hoped . . .’ Agrippina tried to break in. ‘My brother’s name . . .’

He spoke over her.

‘I’ll name him after my father! Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus. Done. Some men take days or weeks over this, speaking to your foreign astrologers, paying them fortunes. No. Lucius is a good name.’ He looked around in simple satisfaction, seeing again the chaos of the birthing room. ‘And are you . . . well served here, Agri? You have everything you need? Is there a wet nurse for the boy?’

‘I’ll do it,’ she said.

Her husband’s gaze lingered on the swell of her breasts as the child sucked.

‘Good . . . good. Slaves looking after you? Drusilla not getting in the way?’

‘Just go. I’ll be fine.’

Her eyes drifted closed while the baby fed. Gnaeus left then, his smile widening as he thought of all the friends he would see. They'd all thought he was finished, just as he had. Yet he was back, with a son to raise and his enemy already being made ash on some funeral pyre. Whatever else happened, this was a good day.

Tiberius drew himself up in bed. A slave added more bolsters to keep him upright, unnoticed. The emperor had taken to sleeping in a chair on Capreae. Lying flat seemed to make his cough worse and fluid crackled in his lungs as breaths came short. He looked around, wishing he had brought that favourite chair with him. He'd been all but ready to slip away from the world, but then Sejanus had roused the old beast with his manoeuvring. He smiled at the thought. Perhaps he should be grateful. The imperial chamber was newly decorated, the walls edged in red and cream, with scenes along a river painted as if he looked through an open window, making the room seem even larger. Sejanus had not been without taste, it seemed.

Outside, Tiberius heard the cadence of marching soldiers. He frowned, aware that he had not summoned the praetorians. The man he had promoted to lead them had never served as one of that elite legion, first in Rome and responsible for the safety of the emperor. That meant Naevius Macro could not have been corrupted by Sejanus, but it also meant he was an outsider and less aware of the traditions of the imperial palace. He had already made the mistake of bothering Tiberius while his physicians were in attendance. If he had come again with some trivial matter, Tiberius decided he would have him cast back down to the vigiles. Fire still needed to be fought in Rome, and order kept.

Though he had been away for over a decade, Tiberius knew the rhythms of the city as well as his own heart – or even better now the thing seemed to miss and race. He only had to glance at his bed slave for the young man to ease back his covers and help him to bring his legs over, fastening sandals to his purple feet. His muscles had withered over the years, he thought ruefully, almost in disbelief. Pale and thin, his legs were somehow pitiful. They had been strong and bronzed once, a lifetime ago when Augustus ruled and the world had been a simpler, cleaner place.

Tiberius felt a moment of satisfaction as his bowels remained quiescent. He'd had trouble down there for years, though he endured regular washes of warm olive oil to free any blockages. Today, though, he was able to wave away the pot. It might come with a price later, but that was the way of things.

His waking robe was one he had brought from Caprae, woven from a shimmering substance that soothed and cooled an emperor's skin. He rubbed his hands down each sleeve in appreciation, feeling the action calm his jangled nerves. He let the slaves help him across to a couch and accepted another square of raw silk and oil as he lowered himself down, still upright. When the herald announced Naevius Macro, prefect of the praetorians, Tiberius was ready to receive him. He nodded to his slaves and they opened the doors, gently and without sound.

Macro waited in the hall beyond, but he was not alone. He stood with a young woman, one who leaned away from him and showed fear. Tiberius knew her. He almost rose before he remembered his dignity, or perhaps the lack of strength in his legs.

The herald entered with the couple, his voice clipped.

‘Praetorian Prefect Naevius Macro begs entrance from his Most Glorious Emperor Tiberius.’

Tiberius blinked in confusion then. With no mention of the woman, she had to be a prisoner, but he had known her as the wife of his son – his widow – with some remnant of imperial protection. He breathed deeply into his pad of silk. If Macro understood so little, he would replace him that day, that very hour!

Tiberius gestured for them to approach. Macro dropped to one knee and bowed his head, but he did not release the woman at his side. Tiberius frowned at the display. The doors glided closed behind and they were alone with just a dozen slaves along the walls, as forgotten as the couch he sat on.

‘Prefect Macro,’ Tiberius said softly, ‘perhaps you can explain to me why you have my son’s widow in your grip. I wonder if you overreach the authority I have granted to your hand. Let her stand, Macro.’

Tiberius watched as the young woman was released to stand straight. She was milk-pale, he noticed with interest, her eyes red from weeping and obviously . . . yes, clearly terrified.

‘You’ve aged beautifully, my dear,’ Tiberius said.

She stared at him like a stunned calf, making him raise one eyebrow. Odd reaction. What on earth had Macro said to her? The man was a block next to her slender form, a mass of muscle, black hair and the scarring that came from a dozen years fighting fires in the city. Tiberius read anger in his new prefect, but directed only at the woman beside him.

‘Imperial Majesty,’ Macro began, ‘one of my lads visited Lady Livia after the death of Sejanus. On my orders,

Majesty. The intention was to spread the word of the execution to members of your family and the nobilitas in Rome.'

Tiberius shifted his gaze back to Livia when she began to weep.

'The young lady in question confessed as soon as she saw legionaries,' Macro said. 'In her fear and grief, she broke and told us everything. It is my duty, therefore, to report to you . . .'

'To report what?' Tiberius spoke over him. He couldn't quite bear to let the man go on. A great yawning chill had entered his chest. Even his usual cough died, so that he sat like a stone.

Macro seemed unwilling to say the words.

'That she aided Sejanus in the death of your son, Majesty. That it was by poison and not a fever. She said too that she was helped by her own physician. I have had him taken up, Majesty, to be questioned.'

'There was no mention of a physician in the reports of my son's death,' Tiberius said.

Without conscious thought, he rose from his couch, standing before them both and radiating a growing, seething rage that they could both feel. She dropped to her knees once more, her hair falling loose so that it hid her face.

'Is it true, Livia? You conspired with Sejanus?' Tiberius whispered.

'At his order, his threat, dominus. Please. I'm so sorry. I loved your son, but Sejanus gave me no choice. He said he would kill me if I refused. He promised . . . to marry me, but you refused to give him permission.'

'Yes, I remember,' he said. His legs had gone numb, he

realised. His body was failing, worse every day. Yet there would be time enough for this.

‘I didn’t know, Livia,’ Tiberius said. He felt himself fill with his own poison. It invigorated him, bringing strength and new life. ‘If you had kept silent, I might never have known.’

She began to sob, but it was just the first turn of the knife. He would do much worse before she was allowed to die.

‘Well done, Prefect Macro. You were right to bring this to me. I will come to see the surgeon put to torture. I want to hear every detail. I only wish I could bring Sejanus back. He went too easily.’

The emperor paused, his old eyes hooded in thought.

‘Have Sejanus’ wife and children taken to the top of the Gemonian steps. They can share their father’s fate. His friends too, Macro . . . his clients, associates – anyone who ever had reason to thank or love Sejanus. Give them all to the strangler and their bodies to the mob.’

Livia began to wail, overcome in grief and horror. Tiberius tutted at the sound.

‘Be brave, my dear. It will sustain you. After all, you owed my son loyalty and love – and gave neither. In his beloved memory, I will do such things . . .’

He began to cough into his silk, unaware that blood had stained his chin and dripped onto his robe. Both Macro and his son’s widow stared in horror. Tiberius growled at them to clear his throat, showing red teeth.

‘Keep her away from blades or anything that might take her life, Prefect Macro. This one is mine.’

4

Agrippina watched Lucius feed at the breast of another, feeling envy and relief in roughly equal measure. She had enjoyed the process for a single day, then endured another week while the toothless little monster chewed her to agony. In fascination, she watched the wet nurse for any sign of discomfort. Perhaps those nipples had hardened over time and use, like the fingers of a leather glove. She shuddered slightly at that image.

Another crash sounded, making her jump. Barbo was awake and the entire estate crackled with his noise and energy. She had endured the great debauch on his return from Rome – his Triumph, as he called it, as if he'd won a battle rather than been witness to an execution. Then the news had come of Tiberius spreading his hooks across the city, snagging friends and family of Sejanus, right down to anyone who had called himself his client. It was a long list and the executions were public and terrible. The Gemonian steps were stained brown, black and red with the bodies torn apart on the stones. Crowds gathered there

every day to see what the emperor would throw for them, like bones to dogs.

Her husband had been wildly drunk for three days after the birth of his son. Agrippina had come across Gnaeus a dozen times, draped around the house, with three or four of his wilder friends in the same stunned state. She had also stepped over the whores they'd summoned from the city, carrying her child close to her chest and nursing a cold fury. Barbo had waved her off in the hours of groaning clarity, pressing wet cloths to his aching head and complaining as if he didn't have himself to blame.

And then, the crash. She'd waited for it, even seen the knowledge of it grow in his eyes. Gnaeus had fallen out with one of his friends and whipped the man out of their home, chasing him right down the road though he'd known him twenty years. Another had made the mistake of saying it was a hard treatment and Barbo had kicked him across a room. It was definitely Barbo when he acted in that way. Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus could occasionally be charming. When he roughened, when the blackness threatened him, he was Barbo. Victor of the chariots, winner of a gold wreath for saving the life of a senator's son. Brave to the point of madness, quick to laugh or strike, with no thought for danger or the future. Before the flood came, the black wave that dragged him under.

Gnaeus stayed another three days in bed after that, snoring and sweating in the summer's heat, waking only to drink, eat or curse the slaves who ran in terror of him. Agrippina had learned not to interrupt the dark days. He was there and not there, though she didn't understand it. Gnaeus certainly remembered little of his moods and the terrible things he said to her. There had been a hundred

times when she'd tried to bring him food and put her head around the door, only to have him roar at her and leap from his slumber to kick it shut. He did not seem to care then if she pulled back fast enough or not.

Having him up and about in the house meant there would either be more storms, tears and rage – or perhaps, if the gods were kind, a period of peace. Agrippina listened with her head cocked as she watched little Lucius feed, trying to judge the stage of her husband's mood from noise alone. She seemed to have spent her whole life in exactly that attitude: head tilted, unsure whether to stay or run.

When he appeared in the doorway, he looked older than the young man she had married, then the victor of countless races in the Circus Maximus. That had been before a decade of hard drinking, of course. His blond hair had thinned, and though he wore wide leather belts to hide it, he had developed a little paunch. Agrippina saw the blankness in his eyes and felt something unclench in her. The anger had passed, thank Mars! Her husband had been drawn out and emptied, made calm by the passing of his personal storm. Those days were too few in the marriage she had known, but she leaped upon the opportunity.

'Gnaeus, there is a messenger from the city waiting for you. He arrived two days ago.'

'What? Why didn't you come and tell me?'

Agrippina hid her grimace and made herself breathe. She had knocked on his door a dozen times, only to have him roar obscenities and kick it so hard he'd split the frame.

'I did try,' she said. 'Don't you remember?'

He shook his head, but there was guilt in the way he

avoided her gaze. He had a dozen names for it – his black wolf, his dark wave. When it had its teeth in him, he was lost for a time. Agrippina wondered if she would have fought harder than he seemed to. Gnaeus – Barbo – fell into it at the first sign, retreating to his rooms for however long it took. It felt . . . lazy.

‘You should have told me, if it was important!’ he said. ‘Where is he now?’

‘He said he had to wait for a reply, so I gave him a room by the outer gate and stables. He is there now, still.’

Gnaeus heard a note of exasperation, or thought he did. He came into the room and loomed over the feeding child. His instinct was always to find the weak spot in others. He knew he frightened her, with his rage and strength. Just having him so close to the baby made the hairs stand on her neck. The wet nurse too felt his scrutiny. She kept looking at the baby rather than the man leering at her swollen breasts.

‘If he’s waited two days, he’ll wait until I’ve had my breakfast, I should think. Whatever it is, would you have me face it on an empty stomach?’ Gnaeus clapped his hands near Agrippina’s face, making her jump. ‘Well? Must I beg for food like some street child? Rouse the kitchen, wife! I’ll have eggs, some of that rosemary-flavoured pork, if we still have it.’

‘Your friend Quintus had the last of that, I’m afraid,’ she replied.

Her husband heard a note of criticism there and scowled.

‘Whatever we have, then. I’ll need to settle my stomach before I’m fit to face the world. I’ll bathe first. Have the food ready for when I get out.’

He left the room and, as always, it was like a gale passing, the air calmer in his absence. Agrippina uncurled fingers she had made into a fist, unknowing. Her son was fussing, his feed complete. She took him and rewrapped his swaddling clothes, wrinkling her nose.

‘He’ll need to be changed and then put down for his nap. I only wish his father were as simple.’

The wet nurse made a snort as she tucked her breast away, but Agrippina’s gaze drifted through the walls to the stables, where a stranger still waited. The messenger had refused to tell her anything, so she had fretted for two days. Only the master of the house could make him speak. She prayed to Juno, goddess of mothers everywhere, that her husband had not hurt them too badly with his excess and his sloth.

Tiberius leaned on a stick as he stood at a high window overlooking Rome. The doctor had examined him with the sort of brisk intimacy he detested in all of them. A body was meant to be touched with lust or gentle affection, not poked like meat on a stone. The Jew had been thorough, though Tiberius grunted and groaned at each outrage. The man had been recommended by a senator even older than his emperor. Such a withered ancient would surely know a good physician, Tiberius had reasoned.

‘You are certain?’ Tiberius asked.

Ehud Ben-Gideon was a brave man. He must have known the news could cost him his life, just to prevent the gossip reaching the rest of the city. An emperor told he would not live could very easily have the messenger silenced. Yet the Jew stood there calmly, nodding his great beard as he put away his tools.

‘Majesty, I can leave you unguents for the sores, but yes, the lumps are wherever I look. If it was just the armpits and groin, I would give you a year, but the ones on your legs . . . It is spreading.’

‘Can you not cut them out?’ Tiberius demanded.

He winced even to say it, as he had endured a previous attempt. A number of foul growths had been sliced from his back in Capreae. He’d seen them like blanched grapes, white and glistening in a bowl. That doctor had not survived his own treatment, when the pain had become too terrible. The scars still wept and the lumps had all returned, but if that was what he had to do . . .

‘The ones near the surface, yes, Majesty. I could do it, though the pain would be great. I have felt deeper ones in your armpits, the burst one in your groin . . . To go beneath those would cost your life that very day.’

‘I understand,’ Tiberius snapped. ‘How long then? Six months? Three?’

The Jew paled beneath the thatch of his beard. Tiberius only glanced at him, but then raised his eyes in frustration. The fellow would be wondering how to survive bad news.

‘I give you my promise,’ Tiberius said. ‘Speak true and you will not be harmed.’

Ehud Ben-Gideon nodded, closing his eyes for an instant.

‘No longer than a month, Majesty. Perhaps even less. The blood in your lungs . . .’

Tiberius blinked slowly as he took it in. He knew the gods would welcome an emperor. His spark of the divine would break free of corrupted flesh and rise, rise. Yet he still wished for longer, for more time. He had hoped to reach his eightieth birthday. A man could feel he had lived

a life at such a number. It felt almost petty to be robbed of that mark. Tiberius swayed as he stood there. A terrible weariness washed across him.

‘I must rest,’ he said. ‘Do I need to remind you not to say a word of what you have seen? You have a family, Ben-Gideon. They will all suffer if news of my health comes from your lips.’

‘I will say nothing, Majesty. I swear to God. I will pray for your good health.’

Tiberius turned to him and the man’s fate hung in a balance he could not see and yet sensed, as if a great weight pressed him down. Tiberius blinked, the will to lash out fading. Even that was taken from him, as his flesh failed. He had no more lust or spite, or laughter. It was all going.

‘There are many gods. For your blasphemy alone, I could have you put to torture.’

‘M-Majesty, I meant no offence . . .’ The man fell to his knees.

Tiberius regarded him for a moment, then waved a hand, suddenly sick of human weakness.

‘Rise, Ben-Gideon. Take your life as payment for your service.’

The doctor looked crestfallen. He would have collected a pouch of gold for the hours he had spent with Tiberius. The emperor brightened at the fellow’s dismay.

‘Leave me now. I have papers I must consider. The emperor does not rest.’

The doctor left quickly, shuffling out with his head bowed as the doors swept open. Tiberius did not have to look into the rooms beyond to know half a dozen scribes waited there, peering like dogs wanting to be fed. They carried senate orders that needed his seal, petitions, laws

he had to read and dismiss or put forward for a vote. It seemed Sejanus had been a busy little bee in his absence. The man had served a purpose in protecting his emperor from all the tedious work that came with ruling. What a shame his ambition had outreached his usefulness.

Tiberius gestured for the door to be shut and sat on his bed. A wave of anger passed through him. He had been blind. He had missed the ruthless ambition Sejanus had brought to the court. If it had not been for the weakness of his son's wife, that part of his sin might still be unknown. Sejanus had moved to secure a new line, snipping off threads of Augustus and Tiberius, one by one. Tiberius clenched his fists, feeling the sore pulse in his groin. It seemed to respond to rage and hate, as if it fed on those things. The rest of him was drained by it, exhausted . . .

His personal slaves helped him to be comfortable and he felt sleep dragging him down, as if he sank beneath a deep green sea. For a time, he struggled against the weight of it, but the doctor's rough prodding had weakened him. Hadn't he meant to have the man arrested? It would have to wait until he had regained his strength.

Agrippina had gone up to the roof of the main house to watch her husband stride out to the stables. The messenger still waited there, of course. The young man wore the same tunic he'd arrived in two days before. She could only hope he had the discipline not to complain about being made to wait. If he did, there was a chance Barbo would injure him – and the society of heralds blacklisted anyone who hurt one of their own. The young man bore their embroidered badge on his chest, but she would have known him for his beauty. Only the best Roman runners

could be heralds – and only men of wealth and power employed them. It meant the news had to be important.

She bit her nails as she stared out to the road, worrying at flesh until spots of blood appeared. Her husband had done something like this a dozen times over the years. He'd missed dinners and meetings of equites in Rome, offending half a dozen families they needed on their side. On his explicit order, she had never been able to explain his dark moods, so she'd had to make up a dozen excuses. Some gripe of her womb or a death in the family were ones she had used before. She wondered if setting fire to a few barns would help.

Agrippina squinted into the distance as Barbo met the man in his stable yard. They were too far off for her to hear what they said, but she tried to read the way Barbo reacted. Not everything that came from the city was bad news. Perhaps he was receiving some honour from the Circus, or from the betting men he favoured. Her husband had a thousand clients in the city, all taking their little stipend from his hand each month. He kept that part of his life private, telling her it was not a wife's business, but . . .

Her thoughts froze as her husband suddenly grabbed the herald by the throat and shook him. Agrippina cried out in horror and turned, racing down through the house though her stitches sent shooting pains through her. She had not yet healed and she ended up hobbling, while her husband put them all at risk again.

'Barbo! Gnaeus!' she called at the top of her voice as she limped down the drive towards the stables. If he heard her coming, it might bring him to his senses, surely. She found herself praying as she reached the first stalls. She entered the little yard to find Barbo standing over a figure

he had either strangled or knocked out. The herald lay sprawled and Agrippina gave a shriek.

‘No, Barbo! What have you done that for?’

‘He thought he would upbraid me in my own home?’ he snapped back. ‘Teach me manners?’

She took in that he was in a cold fury, that he held a small knife in his hand. Agrippina held her breath as she came to his shoulder and saw spots of bright blood on the stone. She had bled there just a week before. This was fresh and bright, where her husband had striped the fellow’s groin under his tunic, reaching out and flicking the blade at whatever flesh snagged on the iron. She’d seen him do it before to slaves, but this was different.

‘What news did he bring?’ she said.

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘It does! What could he have said to make you so angry? What will I do now? The heralds will cut your family from the lists – and mine.’

‘No they won’t,’ he said with a sneer. ‘You don’t know how things work, Agri. They’ll take a payment in silver and they’ll say nothing at all after that. However, this fool might think twice before he talks to a member of my class again about respect.’

He knelt at the herald’s side and began lightly slapping his face. The man stirred slowly and Agrippina saw a bruise on his cheek where her husband had struck him.

‘Come on, wake up. I’ll charge you rent if you stay here any longer. You should owe me for two days in my house, eating my food, lying on my bed. Wake up . . .’

The herald came round in a panic, scrambling away from the master of the house. He wore a sick expression as he felt his groin and saw blood on his fingers.

‘You cut me!’

‘I taught you to be polite,’ Gnaeus said with a shrug.

Agrippina watched anger and spite replace the herald’s shock. There was still fear there as he faced her husband. Barbo had that effect on people.

‘You will hear from the heralds,’ the man said. He moved away with something like dignity, limping badly.

‘Tell them to send the bill to me,’ Gnaeus called after him. He waited with one hand cupped at an ear for any reply, but none came.

‘You still have not told me the message he brought,’ Agrippina said into the silence.

Her husband cursed under his breath. He liked to hold such things over her and she thought for a moment that he would just walk away. Yet he had spent all his anger on the herald.

‘It seems the senator . . . has not let his accusation die along with Sejanus. He has petitioned Tiberius to rule on the matter. He sent the messenger himself, to be sure I was told. Nasty whoreson that he is. His wife, too.’

‘Though you slept with her,’ Agrippina said coldly.

He waved a hand.

‘I was drunk! I can hardly even remember what I did to her. By the gods, woman, will you waste your time on that? Are you stupid? Her husband will plead his case to the emperor. If he is heard . . . it will be more than some penalty paid to the heralds. A lot more.’

Agrippina turned on her heel and walked away from him. She would need a change of clothes, a personal guard, two of the horses saddled with her own carriage, a more sedate thing than the one Gnaeus used . . .

‘Where are you going?’ he called behind her.

‘To fetch a cloak. I’ll stay in the city tonight. I have to see Gaius, to sort this out. He is the heir now. He will not turn me away.’

‘You haven’t seen him in years.’

‘Even so, I know him. He is still my brother.’

5

A woman of Agrippina's class could not simply leap onto a horse or a chariot, riding off alone. She had to be kept safe on the road, which meant guards and personal slaves. In all, a party of almost forty men and women accompanied their mistress. She had sent house guards ahead to announce her entrance into the city. A descendant of Augustus might beg permission to enter, as a matter of formality, but it was never in doubt.

Praetorians were standing to perfect attention as the Appian gate opened for her entourage. Agrippina bowed her head to them. Her mother had told her once that men of lesser station remembered such things for the rest of their lives. It was a gift she could bestow in return for their courtesy. She was pleased she had remembered.

That entrance to the ancient city brought her past the Circus Maximus. The road to the forum passed between the huge racetrack and the Caelian hill to the east, lit gold at that hour. The sun was low on the horizon and she wanted to be safely indoors by nightfall. The imperial

palace precinct would be lit, of course, as well as the eternal lamps that burned on temples to Jupiter and Vesta, but still, Rome was a dark city after sunset.

Agrippina realised she had seen more praetorians than the last time she was there. They seemed to be on duty at every corner, shrine and monument, fully armed and armoured. Under the shadow of helmets, they watched crowds hurry home to families and an evening meal. She found their presence calming rather than a source of fear. Where there were praetorians, there was order.

Her carriage rumbled slowly past the white walls of the Circus. Agrippina repressed a grimace at the thought of Barbo's victories there. His greatest happiness lay on that track, as he had told her a score of times. He always looked wistful then, like a little boy. Even that thought was enough to make her clench her fists. Perhaps he had found glory too early in his life, so that all that came later was just a shadow in comparison.

By one of the Circus gates, a bronze statue was in the process of being pulled down by a team of workers. Still green, it had not yet mellowed to the golden-brown of older pieces. Agrippina sent one of her slaves to ask and learned that it was a likeness of Sejanus, one of the last in the city. Tiberius had been thorough in his destruction of the man's memory and line. Agrippina shuddered at that thought. Every moment brought her closer to the centre of the web, where the slightest mistake could mean destruction. She raised her head. She had a son now, blinking and innocent, utterly reliant on her success.

The emperor's praetorians became a still more obvious presence as Agrippina's party reached the imperial palace. Plebeians melted away, moving to the side to let

her carriage through, then easing back into her wake. Their own lives went on, presumably important to them. Agrippina felt curious eyes on her and sat with a straight back as a pair of praetorians stepped out and the carriage drew to a gentle halt, her driver bowing over his whip.

She rose from her seat when yet another praetorian opened the carriage door and stood back. Two of her party had gone ahead to request a meeting with her brother. It had been her decision not to approach the emperor directly. Such a request would be recorded and made official. More, Tiberius could easily keep her waiting for days and time was too short for that, with a senator's spite in the balance. No, if she was to save Barbo and, through him, herself, she needed to find Caligula.

She frowned as more of the imperial regiment appeared, halting before her personal guard. They wore plumed helmets on duty, as well as layered kilts of cloth and leather and shaped chestplates. Their swords were sheathed, but there was no question who was in control in that place, so close to the emperor. Agrippina did not like leaving her people behind, but a senior praetorian stepped in close and bowed deeply, seeking to calm her nerves.

'Do I have the honour of addressing the Lady Ahenobarbus? Centurion Italus, First Cohort of the Guards. I command the watch, until dawn.'

Agrippina nodded her head. She had an idea that both watch commander and first cohort were significant posts in any regiment, but that was about the end of it. Still, he was a rugged-looking man and she smiled at him. He hesitated, thrown off his stride.

'I . . . er, I have responsibility for your safety on imperial

grounds, my lady. Believe me, you have nothing to fear from this point on.'

Agrippina thanked him, resting her hand on his for a moment. He was red-haired, she noticed. That was unusual in one whose name and profession proclaimed him a man of Rome. Italus carried his helmet under his arm and of course, he saw where her gaze rested. He chuckled then, running his bare hand through very tight locks.

'This? Blessing and a curse. Could be a touch of Thrace on my mother's side. I am not at all quick to anger, though, as these lads will surely confirm.'

He indicated the praetorians standing to attention on the steps leading up to the imperial grounds. Agrippina chuckled at his words, feeling some of the tension slip away. She did not look back at the guards she had brought. They were overmatched and busy maintaining perfectly blank expressions.

'I am glad to hear it, Centurion Italus. I'm sure I am in good hands.'

To her pleasure, he flushed. Short and wide in his build, she had no doubt he was a fearsome soldier. Yet his loyalty was to the emperor . . . and perhaps the imperial family.

'I have asked to meet my brother, Gaius Caesar,' Agrippina went on, as if it were no stranger than asking permission to marry or open a shop. As commander of the watch, this Italus would have been informed. No doubt it was for that reason an actual centurion had come down to escort her. There was no surprised shifting of his stance or widening of eyes. Yet she thought the reminder was not wasted. Italus bowed very deeply and offered his hand to ascend the steps. His palm felt like a great rough glove, she thought. Barbo's hands were similar, from all his work with reins.

‘Do you know my husband, Centurion Italus?’ she asked. ‘You’re around the same age, if I’m any judge.’

‘Barbo, my lady? I had the pleasure of winning a small fortune on his races when I was just starting out. That money bought me a little house, so if you’d pass on my thanks to him, I would be grateful.’

‘He’ll be delighted to hear that,’ Agrippina said warmly.

Once more, the man flushed and she could feel the heat of his hand on hers. She was twenty-two years old and suddenly aware of that touch, so that she almost pulled away. It was confusing, the cascade of emotion that rippled through her. She was subtly aware of the same mood reflected in the man at her side. He too seemed to be breathing a little faster. She bit her lower lip in thought. Very odd.

Little by little, they passed the bristling lines of defence around the emperor’s personal rooms. Agrippina was led through vaulted halls and cloisters. She passed sentries and slaves by the hundred, all scurrying along on duties known only to themselves. The imperial precinct was not quiet, even in the night. It bustled, with rooms of scribes scratching away and guards tramping back and forth in a jingle of metal. Agrippina was hurried through it all. Her stitches began to hurt, though the midwife had said she was healing very well. She gave no sign of it to the centurion striding along beside her. There was something about Italus that meant she did not want to talk of her son.

He halted at last on the gloomy edge of an open garden. The moon showed overhead and water trickled nearby, drawn through narrowing lead pipes until it sprang out, cold and fresh. Rome was full of such wonders, and yet she was surprised. She felt very alone in that moment.

Perhaps the centurion sensed her fear. Italus rested his hand on her arm, just a touch, but strangely intimate in that place.

‘I had word to bring you here . . . orders. I won’t go far. I take my duty very seriously, my lady. If you call, I will come back like a battle charge, all right?’

He withdrew then, clattering away so that she had a sense of how far he went. She shuddered slightly in the night breeze. The moon silvered the trees and plants, revealing a bench and a construction of iron, like a shrine. Ivy twisted around the bones of it and flowers budded there, heavy with scent. Yet she was too afraid to bend to them. She was certain someone watched her, though she could not have said exactly how she knew. Her heart beat hard and she stood very still, soaking in the stillness.

‘Gaius?’ she whispered. His name was a breath and she did not know for certain. It had been too long and the older brother she’d loved was just a memory. He would be twenty-four, she realised. It was hard to imagine.

‘I see you, Agrippina,’ he said.

His voice, thin and reedy, came from the night. She started, turning to the sound as her brother stepped out into the moonlight. He was smiling at her, but it was wrong somehow, as if he was annoyed she had guessed at his presence.

Agrippina moved to embrace him and he allowed her to. He held her tightly, leaning back to look at her. With no warning, he darted in suddenly, clumsily, kissing her on the lips, pressing hard enough to hurt.

She gasped as he broke away, raising one hand to her mouth as if she had been stung.

‘It has been too long, sister. I think of the days we

spent with our father and mother all the time. I think sometimes . . . they were the happiest years I have known. Do you remember when I bought that little blue pup? Until it was caught in that snare? I tried for years to breed another just the same, but the colour was impossible. Was it grey, do you think? I remember it as a true shade of blue, but no one can find a dog with the same coat. I tell you, if I'd known it was the only one, I'd never have let it run around like that . . .'

He rattled on and on, words pouring out of him. Agrippina assumed he was nervous, though she could not understand why. Gaius was the one with the ear of Tiberius. He was the one who had been raised, step by step, to become heir. Yet he was scarred, his face and arms marked with pale lines. She looked on him in a sort of wonder. If he lived, her brother would rule the entire empire, would command men like Italus – and a million like him. Her own problems seemed so trivial in comparison to that.

'Gaius . . .' she tried.

He spoke over her, lost in recollection.

'Father was so angry, do you remember? He said a man was not a man if he could not ride. So I climbed back on, though the beast had thrown me half a dozen times. It feels like yesterday, Agri. You were there! I tell you, it is a joy to meet another who remembers those times. You *do* remember, Agri? I have asked Drusilla and she says she was too young.'

The name brought Agrippina out of a sort of reverie.

'You've seen Drusilla?'

'She came to me a few days ago.' He leaned in closer, as if imparting secrets. Agrippina could feel his breath on her ear. 'You know, she does not like the husband she has. She

believes he is barren and asked me to find her another, one who has already fathered a child . . .' He stopped suddenly, his eyes large and dark. He turned his face without moving away, so that his lips brushed her cheek. 'There are so many of them, Agri, all coming here to ask something of me. Yet I didn't see one of them when I was in Capreae, when I was alone and in the dark. No one came then to seek me out.'

'We didn't know where you were,' Agrippina breathed.

She eased away a fraction and he moved with her, as if he was used to exactly that and knew how to counter.

'Oh, you could have found me, sister, if you'd looked! I wish you had. I often talk of the little boy I was – do you remember? – the one who marched about in his soldier's uniform, the one they called Caligula? I talk of him because he died, Agri. I left that little boy behind on the island. The man I am is not him, not any longer. I am just . . . a hollow thing.'

'I'm sure that is not true,' she said.

He tilted his head and his eyes were completely black under the moon. She found she was shivering and it had nothing to do with the night's cold.

'It's true, isn't it? Though I am scarred, you still see the boy I was, not the man I have become. How fascinating, sister. I wonder if Drusilla feels the same? I suppose little Livilla was too young to remember anything. I asked her and she says it is all just mist and a few flashing images. She hardly even remembers our father, Agri. I do, though. I remember the great Germanicus on campaign, with all those legions flashing silver and gold in the sun. I remember it all. It was a happy time, wasn't it? Say it was.'

Agrippina thought back as she had not done for years.

She had no interest in the past, not at all. Yet she could see a terrible yearning in the young man waiting for her to respond – and she had adored him once.

‘It was a happy time, Gaius. At least, as I remember it. I’d be pleased to see what memories we share, of course, though you know I have just had a son of my own. I should not leave him for too long.’

‘I heard!’ he said, his voice roughening. ‘You’ve only just arrived and you are thinking about heading home? Did I do something to offend you, sister?’

‘No, of course not! I just don’t want to impose on you. You must have so many demands on your time.’

His mood flickered back to laughter and he kissed her once again, too hard. She broke free of him and raised her hand. His breath smelled of cloves, she realised. She could taste them on her own lips. He frowned at her.

‘Are you all right? You seem nervous . . .’

Agrippina summoned her courage. She had a sense of being in the same room as a wild thing, a broken thing. She was afraid. Yet she had come for a reason and she could not leave without making the attempt.

‘I am just worried about my husband. He’s been a fool and I don’t know how to save him from the consequences.’

‘Isn’t it strange, the way we bind ourselves to others. We are still the ones we were, but then there are these husbands and wives . . . Tiberius has told me to wed a senator’s daughter, to secure an heir. Is that not passing strange? I will share my bed with one I never knew as a child, while you . . . If I help you, will you stay with me tonight? I want to see what you remember of the camps. I could have a tent raised in the garden here, or . . . no! Better still! I’ll have one made from blankets in my sleeping quarters. We

could lie together there, as we used to as children and talk the whole night.'

'I would like that . . .' she said. 'If Barbo doesn't . . .' She stopped as he held up one hand, turning his head.

'Uncle!' her brother called. 'Where is that old fool?'

'Uncle Claudius is here?' Agrippina asked.

'He is somewhere around, though he may have wandered off or returned to his scribbling. Always writing, Agri! The man doesn't seem to realise life is to be lived. Instead, he just writes about better men. Uncle!'

'I am here,' a voice called.

Agrippina heard steps approaching, then halting. She blinked as another voice called a challenge.

'Who's that there?' her brother demanded, peering into the moonlit gloom. 'Who is speaking?'

Agrippina saw the centurion appear on the path, halting and standing to attention.

'Centurion Italus, dominus. Officer on watch.'

The man was very careful not to look at Agrippina, though she stared at him. Her brother shrugged in irritation.

'What are you doing, centurion? Apart from disturbing a private conversation.'

'My apologies, dominus. I wished to challenge the one who approached you. Your safety . . .'

Gaius waved him to silence.

'Yes, yes. I understand. You are to be commended, although how you could see a threat in Uncle Claudius, I do not know. Have you seen him? Come here, uncle. Show yourself to this man who thought you might be a dangerous assassin.'

Out of the shadows came one Agrippina remembered

well. Younger than her father, he had always been kind to her. Yet Gaius had the right of it. The figure that approached had an obvious limp. Claudius shambled rather than walked. He smiled to see her, however.

‘Agrippina! By the f-fates, you have become a great b-beauty. You were no more than a girl when I saw you at your w-wedding. Can it really be ten years ago?’

‘Nine, uncle. I remember you gave me wrapped sweets.’

She embraced him and felt he was trembling. The poor man was a scholar, she had heard, working on some record of Augustus or early Rome. He was not made for public life, not really. Even at her wedding, he’d had to retire to a private room and sit with a cloth over his eyes. She kissed him on both cheeks while her brother turned to the centurion.

‘Return to your duties. There are many threats, many dangers. My uncle is not one of them, but still, be vigilant.’

Italus bowed deeply rather than reply to the scorn they could all hear. In quiet dignity, he retreated, leaving Gaius alone with his sister and uncle.

‘Praetorians have too much pride these days,’ Gaius muttered. ‘I should trim their feathers for them. Perhaps I will.’

‘I’m sure he was just doing his d-duty as he saw it,’ Claudius said softly. The older man flinched as Gaius turned on him.

‘What was that? What does my limping, stuttering uncle know about soldiers? Did you serve, uncle? I don’t recall your name in the lists.’

‘No, I didn’t s-serve, as you are aware. My leg made that imposs . . . im . . . p-poss . . .’

Agrippina winced. Her uncle's stammer always grew worse when he was angry or humiliated.

'I did want to ask for your help, Gaius,' Agrippina said, interrupting the cruelty. 'I hate having to ask, though you have not been back long and I've just given birth. I would love to spend the night talking over our memories, but I don't know how I can while my husband's fate rests in the balance.'

'You seek to bargain with me?' Gaius said. At least he had forgotten his humiliation of her uncle. Yet he turned on her and his expression was unpleasant. 'A deal, is it? I grant you a favour and you do whatever I want?'

Agrippina hesitated at his choice of words. She did not want to give this strange young man that sort of power over her. Once again, she cursed her husband for getting her into an impossible position. How many times had she paid for his anger, in apologies or fines or gifts to smooth raised hackles? She nodded.

'There is a senator, Albus. He wishes to petition the emperor in censure against my husband. He claims . . .' She forced herself to say it. 'He claims Gnaeus seduced his wife.'

'I know Albus,' her brother said. 'Done. It will be forgotten.'

'Just like that?' Agrippina said. 'Are you sure?'

Her brother took her by the hand and she did not resist.

'I've learned a few things in my time on Capreae, sister. One is that a man will do anything to live. Anything. If I offer Albus life without his petition or . . . death with it, he will drop his claim.' He thought for a moment. 'In truth, there are one or two who can neither be bought, nor threatened, nor bullied. Our father was such a man, as you remember. He had honour.'

‘What if . . . this Senator Albus is like that?’

Gaius shrugged. ‘They die just as easily as any other kind, sister. That is the truth of it. I’ve seen them opened up with knives and hooks. They all look the same after that.’ He took her hand in a firmer grip. ‘Now come with me. Uncle? Wake up, you old fool. Have a tent raised in my rooms. Blankets or sheets will do. Like a child’s fort. Tonight, my sister and I will be innocents, lost in the woods.’

He walked his sister away from the garden, along corridors where flickering lamps lit the walls gold. Their uncle hurried ahead to do his bidding.

Agrippina found she was afraid. She had said her part and received something like a promise, though she was not sure yet what she had unleashed. Her brother’s grip on her arm was unrelenting and she did not know for certain what she was being led towards. Into the silence, she spoke, seeking something normal in the terrible emptiness.

‘How is the emperor? Is he well?’

She saw a grimace cross her brother’s face as he shook his head.

‘He is very ill, Agri. I cannot say if we are in the end days. There are physicians in Rome, clever men who tend him.’

He looked around as he walked, to see if there were slaves nearby. He whispered then, pulling her towards him.

‘I have questioned one or two. They said he would not see another month. Yet he lives. He endures still.’

Agrippina saw fear in her brother then. She had thought Gaius the most favoured man in Rome. He was the only surviving heir after all. It seemed the cost was more than she had understood.

‘I can still hardly believe you will succeed him,’ she said, her voice just a breath.

He shook his head, his eyes suddenly sharp.

‘Don’t even *say* it, sister! Our brothers were killed. Poor Nero and Drusus stood where I stand tonight. No, I must guard every moment against the knives of my enemies. I pray for the emperor to recover and live. That is all I have to say on the matter.’

His expression became thoughtful then, while his grip tightened. She knew she would have bruises there in the morning, though he seemed unaware and she did not cry out.

‘I am the heir tonight, sister. But if I die, your son will inherit all. Do you realise? Your Lucius is next in line after me. I should have him brought into the city, guarded like the imperial family. He is a treasure of Rome this year.’

Agrippina spoke quickly, all too aware that he had the power to do exactly what he said.

‘You will marry, surely, Gaius?’

‘Yes . . . of course,’ he said. ‘Tiberius has said I must.’ His eyes were shadowed as he looked at something inside himself.

Agrippina went on briskly.

‘Then you’ll have half a dozen children of your own, just as mother did. They’ll all stand before my son in the succession. That’s just as it should be. And you are young! You’ll rule for fifty years . . .’ She broke off as he pressed a hand over her mouth.

‘I wish only for the emperor to grow strong, Agri. Nothing else. Come. Talk to me of childhood. I think it was the only time I was ever happy.’

6

Gaius felt at peace. His sisters were like balm to him, like warm oil on his skin. Having them lying alongside and talking for hours, then rubbing his temples when dreams dragged him awake . . . he could not remember when he had last slept so well. Drusilla was perhaps a little bovine in her affection, or too obvious in her desire to be rid of her barren husband. Agrippina, though – she was his favourite. She remembered their childhoods with extraordinary clarity. She added colour and light to things even Gaius barely recalled, until he could *see* them once more. They'd laughed until tears came to his eyes at some of the sillier memories. Now he was calm, a boil lanced and made again good flesh.

He scratched the back of his neck as he stood there, wondering if he could find property for them both, closer to the imperial estate. If his sisters kept bad dreams from spilling in, it would be worth uprooting their lives. Yet it was delicate, especially for Agrippina, with her baby son and famous husband. Gaius could not offer her gold or

property, not when she had the wealth of the Ahenobarbus family. Nor could he easily remove that wealth, so that she would be forced to come to him. They owned mines and vast tracts of land around the Po valley in the north. Such riches were a Gordian knot Gaius could not cut, or at least not as Alexander had. There were other ways.

He frowned, though it was not without a sense of pleasure. Even as a child he had always loved puzzles. He would worry at them as his blue pup had torn at his sisters' dolls, wrestling and teasing and tugging until they just . . . fell apart. Until they were just rags.

The young man looked up at footsteps approaching, the iron studs of a legionary sandal on a marble floor. It was a sound he had known all his life and it made Gaius think of the little boots the legion smiths had made for him. Life had been simpler then! Was it any surprise he preferred to dwell in the past, when his father had been alive and no one had ever hurt him? Gaius felt his skin roughen like plucked gooseflesh. He'd thought Capreae a place of safety. Only when he was there, helpless, had he discovered the sort of man Tiberius truly was.

Naevius Macro wore the praetorian uniform well, Gaius thought. Wide and short, the man resembled nothing so much as a young bull, with muscles bulging in his legs and an oft-broken nose completing the image. Macro carried a plumed helmet under one arm and when he came close enough to salute, Gaius could see burn scars marked those massive arms as well as one calf. The skin looked almost curdled there, as if it had been made liquid and stirred. Gaius let his fingers drift to whorls and ridges along his own forearm. They had both known pain, it seemed.

Gaius waited for the man to assess their relative status.

It was true he had few titles to set against ‘prefect of the praetorians’, but then Gaius was the official heir to the empire. The conclusion was reached in a beat. Macro dropped to one knee and bowed his head. Gaius smiled on him, the great fire-stained block of a man.

‘Please rise, Prefect Macro,’ he said. ‘It was at my request that you were summoned to the emperor’s rooms.’

‘I see. Is His Majesty well, dominus?’

In reply, Gaius gestured to the six praetorians who stood at attention in that outer room. The door to the emperor’s sleeping chamber was closed, but they were still on guard there, at all hours of the day and night.

‘Some things are not for the ears of others. I wish to speak to you in private, Macro. Dismiss your men.’

‘I . . . That would be against standing orders, dominus. I would prefer . . .’

‘You are new to your role,’ Gaius said coldly. ‘I understand your hesitation. Now put it aside. You and I will remain here. Have your men take station outside this room, where they can rush in, if they want!’

Still the fellow hesitated. Gaius wondered if he had misjudged. He let the silence stretch, something he had learned from Tiberius. A battle could be fought without a sound, the old man said, if enough pressure was brought to bear. Gaius shuddered as memories surfaced. It may have been that change in his eyes that forced the praetorian to look away.

Macro raised his right hand like a blade and pointed twice, out of the room. The six guards moved immediately, turning on the spot and marching out. They drew the doors shut behind them and Gaius was alone with a man who had fought fires in Rome and kept order when the

mobs looted or ran wild. He reminded himself of that as he faced him. Macro may have been new to the praetorians, but he was not inexperienced. Gaius wondered if all he had learned on Capreae would be equal to this task. He had been taught manipulation there, as well as horror.

‘Do you know the Greek word “krisis”?’ he said softly.

Macro looked at him, choosing to stand at attention though Gaius moved from foot to foot, pacing and halting as his thoughts came.

‘It means to make a choice, Prefect Macro. It means the moment in a man’s life when he decides to take one path or another. Perhaps even when he chooses life or death.’

‘I . . . I don’t understand, dominus,’ the man said.

Gaius smiled, hearing his nervousness, his confusion. Good. He gestured to the double doors that led to the emperor’s private sleeping rooms.

‘Emperor Tiberius lies not a dozen paces beyond those doors. He sleeps, though it is never soundly, not in these latter days. No, he is consumed by sickness. His flesh and breath are foul with it. His liver is full, his bowels rich with it. His doctors say he will be dead within a week, but he clings to life. Do you understand? They say his illness is final, that he will not recover.’

Sweat had broken out on the prefect’s face, Gaius noted with interest. He wondered if those who fought fires perspired more easily than other men, or whether it was simple nervousness. Macro had developed a sheen, as if he had been oiled.

‘I am sorry to hear that, dominus,’ Macro said, swallowing. ‘I will make an offering at the temple of Asclepius – and to the priests of Apollo on the Campus Martius. Perhaps there might be a miracle, even at this late hour.’

‘Oh, I don’t think so. No more miracles, Macro. Not for him.’ The younger man turned his black gaze on the prefect of the imperial guard and it was Macro who wished to step back. ‘Death comes for Tiberius on great, dark wings. And you, Prefect Macro, you too stand beneath.’

‘Dominus? I’m not sure I catch your meaning.’

Gaius took a deep breath, holding to the calm he had earned the night before, that still suffused him like a morning chill.

‘I think you understand very well. This is the moment of your crisis, Macro. You face a choice that will determine the rest of your life. You may not have wished for it to steal upon you this day, but that is the nature of such things.’

Still the man blinked at him, his skin and neck reddening subtly, like wine spreading beneath the surface. Gaius smiled, but it was a terrible thing to see.

‘I am twenty-four years old, Macro. When I am emperor, Rome will be made new. Like Augustus, I could rule for fifty years. If you care about Rome, think of that.’

He gestured to the closed doors, stepping closer and bending his head. When he spoke, it was a rush of breath, as if words spilled from him, as if he related a dream.

‘In there, Macro, a man of seventy-nine years of age chokes on every breath. Oh, there is a part of me that wants him to taste every reeking tooth and piece of lung. He has earned his agonies, Macro, more than you will ever know. Yet he is still emperor in this moment. With a word, with a single order, Tiberius could order my death, yours, anyone’s. In the madness of his pain, he could undo the line of succession. I swear to you . . . I will

bring morning back to Rome, Macro, unless a dying man lashes out.'

The prefect certainly understood. Gaius could see that in his eyes. He had not lied before. Naevius Macro faced the most important choice of his life. He could go into the emperor's chambers and denounce the young man waiting outside. Such an act might even win him honour and wealth. Gaius could see him thinking it through and almost smiled. Tiberius had shown him how to twist the will of others. It was the old man's final pleasure, that survived even beyond the flesh.

The wonder of it was that the emperor's own savagery was a weight on the scales. The deaths Tiberius had ordered for the family and friends of Sejanus had shocked Rome in the end, sickening even the baying crowds. Macro would know an accusation of treason might sweep him up in the purge, even if he was the one making it. No man slept well with a scorpion in his bed.

'You have a choice,' Gaius said when the silence ached and echoed in his head. 'A crisis. Obey me tonight and earn the favour of an emperor and a new age – or head into that room and throw me to the wolves.'

'I gave an oath . . .' Macro whispered.

Gaius peered at him, surprised at the continuing struggle. He had expected to dangle his favour and have the man leap for it like a trout. Yet it seemed Macro was a man of conscience.

'An oath to Rome, to the emperor. This is best for Rome, Macro. From today, I am Rome. Pledge your allegiance to me – and the sun will rise.'

'How would you have me do it?' the man said softly.

Gaius saw the decision was made. The crisis had passed

and the prefect was once again calm, steady. It was true – the *choice* was the storm. When it was made, truly made, the breeze became gentle and the sun warmed once more.

‘There must not be a mark on his flesh. That is why . . .’ Gaius hesitated, but he was sharing intimacy with this man and he carried on in a rush. ‘I cannot do it. I would . . . tear him with my nails. I would bite his throat. There would be no hiding what I would do to him, if I began.’

He saw Macro shudder and clenched his fists, forcing himself to calm.

‘There are dozens of blankets in the chests of that room. The emperor complains of the cold at night and they are ready for him. Pile them on, Macro. Press them down until he cannot take a single breath. He is very weak. You will be giving him more mercy than he deserves. Go now, if you will go at all.’

Macro bowed his head.

‘For Rome, then. For a new morning. For you, dominus.’

Gaius reached out and clapped him on the shoulder. It was the sort of thing men did, he had noticed. It felt awkward and his smile twisted.

‘I order it. The responsibility is mine,’ he said. His heart beat like galloping hooves, making him dizzy. This was the moment. He’d thought it had passed, but it was upon them both.

The door opened in silence when Macro pressed on it. The room beyond was deep in gloom, but they could make out the figure snoring in the bed. Gaius found himself slipping in behind the prefect like a shadow. He glanced at Tiberius and saw he lay on his back with his mouth open, his cheeks sunken as if he was already dead. The air smelled like rotten teeth.

Macro moved with the neatness of a competent man. He opened chests along the walls and collected a huge pile of blankets, more than he could carry in one go. Gaius stood in the corner of the room and watched as he laid the first of them almost gently across the sleeping form.

Tiberius snorted in his sleep, disturbed and shallow. Both men froze, though Gaius smiled to see it. They were like children stealing food, not men bent on the greatest sin of all. Macro moved again, bringing another dozen layers and laying them on the rest. Tiberius stirred and Gaius gathered his own armful and laid them down, both men moving faster. Perhaps forty of the things pressed on the old man when he surfaced.

‘Who is there?’ came a voice. It was thin, weaker than he remembered, but Gaius still shivered. ‘Take these coverings from me, would you? They are too heavy.’

The emperor’s eyes drifted shut once more. He had spent a lifetime with every whim being met, so did not trouble to repeat himself. Yet Macro opened a massive new chest and piled another armful on. When Tiberius spoke again, it was with some of his waspish authority.

‘Open the shutters and let the day in. Are you slaves deaf? Take these blankets off me. Where are my guards?’

Macro had piled sixty or eighty blankets on the bed. The armful he brought then was vast, as much as he could carry. He raised it over Tiberius, the old man blinking up at him in confusion.

‘Macro? What are you doing?’

Tiberius tried to call for help, but the cry was smothered as Macro pressed down and down, leaning on the man’s head. Gaius too crept forward, drawn like a bad tooth

from the corner. After a moment of hesitation, he too pressed his weight on the mass of cloth.

Tiberius struggled for a time. They could see twitching movements, then a terrible stillness. Macro began to ease back and Gaius put out a hand, shaking his head.

‘A little longer, I think. Keep the weight on.’

After what seemed an age, the struggling began again, weaker and yet more desperate. That too faded. Gaius nodded. He made Macro wait even then, unsure if he wanted to see the old man in death. No, he had to be certain. They pulled back the blankets and Tiberius was there, staring. Wonderingly, Gaius touched a thumb to each open eye. There was no reaction; the emperor was gone.

Gaius was panting, he realised, as if he had run a great race. He felt tears spill down his cheeks and laughed at himself. He heard a creak of leather then and looked round to see the prefect kneeling to him.

‘My emperor,’ Naevius Macro said.

‘You have done well. I will not forget. Now, put all the blankets away and smooth down the bed. There will be a funeral and much grief in the city. I will declare a week of mourning for a great emperor. Let us dress Rome in black for a time. After that, the sun will rise.’

Agrippina entered the house. On other days, she took the time to tend her horses herself. She loved the great beasts almost as much as her husband did. On that day, she walked away from the carriage without looking back, leaving the house slaves to brush and water them.

Her husband was waiting for her, as she had known he would be. One glance told her Gnaeus had been drinking, which was also not a surprise. His eyes were bloodshot

and he supported himself with one hand on a wall as he stood there. She tried to go past, but he grabbed her arm, cruel in his strength. Or perhaps he didn't care, she was never sure. She could hardly remember a time when she had not been bruised by him, not since the day of their marriage.

'Well? What did he say?' Gnaeus demanded. 'Don't you think I have a right to hear? It's my . . .' He slurred and lost the words in fury, so that he almost shook her. Agrippina pulled away, her own temper rising.

'You're drunk, though it's barely noon. Take your hands off me! *Get off!* Why paw at me, Gnaeus?'

'Because you are my wife, but you would sweep past and tell me nothing! Because you prefer to . . . to keep me begging for answers. What did your brother say? What did he do? You were gone all night, Agri!'

She saw tears in his eyes, but then he often cried when he drank. Weeping came sometimes in the midst of anger, before the great collapse into snoring sleep. She had seen it all too often.

'I stayed as long as I had to, and not an hour longer. I have not seen Gaius for years and I was asking him for a favour. So I had to stay in his arms all night, listening to his stories of my father.' She shuddered and though her husband was very drunk, he saw.

'Did he . . . make you? Did he force himself . . .' He could not continue and Agrippina shook her head.

'No. He . . . I . . . He is just a troubled young man, Gnaeus, not a monster. And he is betrothed – to the daughter of Senator Silanus. Anyway, I told him about my stitches, that I was hurt in giving birth. He made me comfort him, but not like that.'

She wrapped her hands around herself. Gnaeus blinked at her, understanding coming slowly in his drunkenness.

‘You *had* to tell him that?’ he said. ‘So he *would* have forced you? Or would it not have been force, maybe? Your family is sick, Agrippina. I’ve always said it. You are all perverse, with no love and no affection.’

Tears of self-pity began to trickle down his cheeks. Agrippina looked coldly on the man she called husband.

‘I needed a favour, Barbo – and that is how my brother sees the world. Without kindness, do you understand? So, yes, I spent the night in his arms, with Gaius whispering in my ear.’ She rubbed the back of her neck suddenly, as if a fly had landed there. ‘A favour you *forced* me to ask, with your indiscretions! So don’t speak to me about what I have or have not done. I have his promise – the senator will cease his petition. You are safe. Our son is safe.’

He reached for her, opening his arms. She pulled back, suddenly furious.

‘Leave me alone. Before I visit Lucius, I would like to bathe and feel clean.’

She swept past him and he could only stare as she called the slaves to heat water and bring towels and oil. Barbo wanted to lash out, but there was no one. He thought wistfully of the dens around the Circus in the city. He could go into any one of them and be cheered by all the drunks and whores. At least they would let him embrace them. They knew his name and who he had been. They told him about his greatest races and then led him to the rooms above. He could forget his vicious little wife then, though her skin made him want to weep. She had been just a skinny rat when he’d married her. Somehow, she had become one of the most beautiful women in Rome. And she was his, but

not his. He knew he was the envy of half the nobilitas. They looked on him and saw a charioteer, a champion, married to the line of Augustus and beloved of the people. They imagined him like a prize bull with his wife – and he should be!

He slumped onto a bench in the hall and opened a new amphora of wine, good and red and watered one-in-three. He drank deeply and frowned, feeling acid or sickness surge. It was strange how the same wine could change its mood. Even the best reds were like women in that way. He chuckled at the thought, his senses swimming.

There were peacock feathers in a tall vase on a wall table and he snatched one out. His head would clear if he tickled his throat and vomited, he knew. Perhaps by then, she would have finished her bathing. She would be more relaxed. He smiled. Yes, even if he had to demand. It had been long enough.

Images of her in the bathing room inflamed him. He dropped the feather and drank the amphora right to the gritty dregs. Red wine spilled down his tunic, but that would wash away. With a wolfish grin, he strode down the corridor after his wife.

At the door of the bathing room, Barbo struck the slave hard, knocking him down. When the man stood up again, a great red welt showed on his face. He did not raise his gaze to the one who had struck him. Barbo might easily have killed him if he had. The mistress had told him to guard the door and he would have given his life against any man except her husband. As Gnaeus Ahenobarbus went in to the bath, the slave resumed his post, rubbing his swelling eye and cheek.

Barbo entered a chamber heavy with steam. More slaves heated water in side rooms, carrying cauldrons on long wooden poles to the little pool set in the centre of the floor. It was the sort of private luxury unknown to most citizens of Rome. To fill it even once took ten or twenty of the huge copper vessels, the waters heated to bubbling and then mixed with a little cold. Gnaeus approached the bath and looked down on his wife as she rested there, her hair like floating seaweed, her eyes closed. He saw she had put one of her concoctions into the waters, some mixture of salts, lavender oil, milk and wild honey. It turned the bath white and left her breasts like two islands in a lake, tipped in brown. He rubbed the stubble on his face, staring like a man with a thirst and no wine to be had.

As he stood there, a pair of burly house slaves entered with another of the steaming cauldrons. They almost dropped their charge as they saw the master of the house was present, but Barbo waved them on and they emptied the hot water into the pool.

Agrippina opened her eyes at the wash of heat. She saw her husband standing there and the slaves scurrying away.

‘The warmth . . . eases aches and worries,’ she said, looking up at him. ‘It leaves me clean, more so than cold water. Is that not wondrous strange? The heat works beneath the skin, somehow. I don’t know . . .’ She spoke almost dreamily, as if on the edge of sleep. Her gaze drifted over her husband and she saw his arousal, guessed his intention in coming to that place. Her eyes narrowed then.

‘You know, Gnaeus, I think men misunderstand something about the world, about women.’

‘What do you mean?’ he said. Perhaps it was the steam

or the wine that stole through him, but he felt the room swaying.

‘Men seem to think . . . They believe their seed . . . marks a woman, stains her, brands her. Yes, that’s it. They think they brand us with just a little splash. If a man forces a woman, he expects her to be marked for ever. Her life must be . . . all that came before that day . . . and then all that came after. Different, do you see? Changed by what happened. As you think you have changed me by lying on top and grunting in my ear a thousand times.’

‘I never wanted to hurt you,’ he muttered. He stood like a boy being chastised, his passion slowly fading.

‘Though you did. Yet bruises heal, and the rest? There is no mark, no stain on me! One warm bath . . . and I am clean again. Nothing touches me, Barbo. Not my brother, not even you.’ To her husband’s confusion, she raised a languid finger to her mouth and made a shushing sound. ‘I won’t tell, Barbo. That all men do will wash away with one . . . good . . . soak.’

‘What did your brother do to you?’ he murmured after a while.

She ignored him, leaning back in the water and closing her eyes. His passion had drooped beyond recovery. He stared for a time before giving up and leaving her alone.

7

Caligula leaned on the balcony, high on the Palatine hill, watching thousands of praetorian soldiers march slowly past. Horns blared, carried by the cornicens of a dozen legions – each represented that day by a few key officers, walking in step. Drums gave the marchers their slow beat, muffled in cloth but still resounding, echoing back from the temples on both sides of one of the widest roads in Rome.

All the soldiers wore black, as he had instructed, a huge expense that had required special orders from an increasingly hostile senate. At least they had not resisted declaring him emperor. There would have been civil war if they had. Gaius grimaced at the thought of those angry old men, glancing aside at the one who stood and watched with him.

Senator Marcus Silanus was a fine, straight-backed member of the nobilitas. His frame was somewhat withered by age, but he had kept all his hair – white, close-cropped and neat next to his tan. The man had held just about every post in the administration and served

under Augustus and Tiberius, loyal to both beyond reproach. He had reached the rank of consul some twenty years before, serving without distinction. Perhaps having his daughter married to an emperor was his greatest ambition, Gaius could not tell. The senator's eyes were bleak as he watched the funeral procession. No doubt he grieved.

Gaius let his eyes rest on the young woman he would marry the following day, when the funeral was safely completed. Claudilla was seventeen, with straight teeth and thick hair in a braid, her body unmarked by scars or disease. He had seen the notes from her inspection. As importantly, her three sisters had borne eleven children between them, which spoke well for the family's fertility. It had all been checked and rechecked by an imperial staff he could now command in his own name. As well as the intimate physical examination, Tiberius had set scribes to pore over the family's bloodline, right back to antiquity. Joining two houses of the nobilitas was never a small undertaking.

She sensed his eyes on her and turned, blushing deeply. Gaius blinked as he saw tears flash. The young woman had not known Tiberius, of course. He had left for Capreae when Claudilla had been just a child. Yet she grieved, sensing loss in the people all around them. Gaius rested his hand on the back of hers, then felt her fingers turn in his so that they were palm to palm. He *had* known the old man. He had no tears to shed for Tiberius, none at all. Yet there were times . . . Gaius blinked again, unsure of himself. He'd thought he had seen every horror the world had to offer on Capreae. He'd thought it had even come home with him, like blood on the hem of a toga, or an odour on his skin. He'd thought it marked him always. He'd chosen

a wife from among a dozen possibilities, eliminating them one by one until only Claudilla remained, and yet, there she was. When she looked up at him, something eased in his chest and the world was somehow right. It felt such a fragile thing, he was almost afraid to meet her eyes. Perhaps it was just trust or love he saw there. It had been too long to be certain he would even know it.

On the road, praetorians bowed their heads as they walked alongside a black carriage. A wax effigy of Tiberius rested on the bier, features at gentle rest, carved by a master and slightly larger than life. The whole thing was drawn by white horses that tossed their heads in the long reins, nervous in front of the crowds. Gaius could see hands jabbing air and open mouths like tiny red coins. The mood did not quite seem to be one of grief. He frowned, his thoughts lingering on the lovely young woman at his side, who brought peace to his troubled soul. He'd thought the people were throwing flowers, but there were no blooms, no bright colours. They threw instead dead stems and reeds, a sign of sterility. He showed his teeth as he understood.

Gaius turned to one of the officers on the balcony, beckoning him closer.

'In this, I am princeps. Use whatever force you must. The mob *will* show respect to the emperor.'

The praetorian saluted and hurried away, taking stairs to the street two at a time as he rushed to fulfil the command. Gaius recalled the words of Tiberius on the titles in Rome. He was 'dominus' to his slaves, 'imperator' to his legions and 'princeps' – first – to all the rest.

He felt Claudilla's hand tighten in his and understood she responded to his glowering expression. Her sweet face

was barely painted, he noted. Her colours were those of youth, not mere oil and pigment. It pleased him. More, he felt a touch of arousal. He almost gasped then. He'd thought at times his little worm might never stir again. Having his wife-to-be looking up at him, lips slightly parted . . . She too was stirred! Was it the display of power? He supposed it was. He thought of a peacock, spreading its tail. Well, he had feathers too.

'Did the people not love Emperor Tiberius?' Claudilla asked him, unaware of the direction his thoughts had taken. Gaius sensed her father leaning in to respond and spoke before the older man could ruin the moment. As his father-in-law-to-be, Senator Silanus was there as a courtesy, nothing more.

'Some did, of course,' Gaius said. 'They are the ones I would protect with my orders. The others, though . . . Tiberius could be cruel at times. He raised a few and . . . dashed more down. It meant he had many enemies by the end.'

Gaius thought of the old man's muffled voice, calling for help under smothering blankets. His hand was trembling. Claudilla assumed it was grief. She reached down and kissed his fingers, then pressed the back of his hand to her cheek.

He smiled at her, realising again that this young woman could draw poison from him.

'It does not give them the right to jeer his procession,' he said softly, 'or throw dead blooms. The old man's ashes are in that urn of gold and ebony, Claudilla. They will pay an emperor the respect he is due, as ruler of Rome and adopted son of Emperor Augustus.'

Gaius nodded at his own words. Yes. Tiberius was dead.

All that remained were his ashes and the authority of the empire he had tended. The old wolf had nearly lost it all to Sejanus, but he had come home in time. Tiberius had snipped that last thread with all the neatness and precision of his younger days. There had been rather more blood after that, of course, enough to bring back troubled dreams of Capreae. Yet it was in the past. Sejanus and his supporters were gone like last winter's frost. Tiberius himself was just fragments, placed in an urn that would be returned to his precious island.

Gaius breathed more calmly as he saw his orders carried out. The praetorians along the route drew swords as they faced the crowd. There was no false threat in the action and silence spread like a wave, back and back into the city. None of those below had been alive when the great Marius had brought his legion into the forum and been jostled by the mob. The man who had been uncle to Julius Caesar had said, 'Make room for your general' – and his men had driven the crowd back in blood and ruin.

Gaius almost hoped the mob that day would riot and force the praetorians to respond. He leaned over the balcony edge, looking for the spark that might set it all in motion. Yet it did not come. The slow drumbeat continued and the procession rolled slowly on, taking the effigy out to the Campus Martius, where it would be burned and the priests of Jupiter and Mars would conduct a service.

Gaius frowned as a fresh thought struck him. They would not be commending the soul of Tiberius as one of the gods. The senate had refused to vote divine honours to the emperor. Such a declaration would have cost them nothing, but they had balked. It was a sign of how many of them Tiberius had frightened, or perhaps it just reflected

their disapproval for the slaughters he had brought back to Rome after so many quiet years. Whatever the reasons, it was a reminder to be wary of those old men.

Caligula was the official heir, made emperor at the instant Tiberius' heart ceased to beat. Oh, they knelt and bowed to him easily enough, but they would still need reining in, he was certain. Like a household of lazy slaves, they had grown slack in the master's absence.

Down below, the crowd had begun a new chant. Gaius turned his head back and forth, trying to make it out. He scowled when he understood, suddenly furious.

'What are they saying?' Senator Silanus said at his elbow.

Gaius stared at the man, irritated by his presence. Would the august senator want to accompany him to his daughter's bedchamber as well? He seemed willing to intrude on the most private moments.

'They are calling for Tiberius . . . oh!' Claudilla said. 'For his ashes to be thrown in the Tiber!'

Gaius beckoned another praetorian over. He was about to give new orders when the line of drawn swords rose and flashed in the sun. Good. The officer he'd sent before had needed no further instruction. Gaius watched as the praetorians hacked into the closest of the crowd, splashing bright-red blood against all the black. The insulting chant was smothered in screams of pain and fear. He nodded, satisfied.

'Make room for your emperor,' Caligula murmured. He may have hated Tiberius, but the old man had still been Rome. They would show him respect.

'Feel my heart race, Gaius,' Claudilla said.

She took his hand and pressed it under the curve of her breast. So innocent, he thought. She had no idea of the

lusts of men. The idea stirred him and he turned to her father, for once distracted by the events on the road below.

‘You may go ahead of us down to the Campus, senator. Claudilla and I will join you for the funeral service.’

The man bowed and left, taking the dismissal well. The praetorians stood like silent statues and Gaius ignored them as he took his bride-to-be by the hand and led her inside. There were slaves there, of course. He saw Claudilla glance at them, suddenly embarrassed. Gaius smiled, understanding.

‘Leave us,’ he said.

A dozen men and women vanished in moments, closing doors as they went. Gaius was left alone with her. She took him by the hand, leading him to the couch. He almost stopped then, pulling away from her fingers.

‘What is it?’ she said. Her eyes were large and dark, he saw. She trusted him, but she was afraid.

‘I think I am . . . a broken thing, Claudilla,’ he said. His voice cracked as he spoke and he knew he was naked in a way that had nothing to do with armour or cloth. ‘I wish . . .’

He could not go on. She gathered him into her arms and they lay on the couch together as he wept and she stroked his hair. After a while, he felt their tears mingling, then more. He could not have said exactly when passion returned, but it did, in a great release that felt a little like death and left him quiet and tangled in her arms.

Barbo lunged for his wife as she tried to retreat. His hip struck a little table as he grabbed her arm, sending a vase crashing onto the floor. Agrippina flinched, both from the pain of his grip and the sound.

‘Look what you’ve done!’ she said, still trying to pull away. He was drunk, as he always seemed to be. She was afraid of his red face and watery eyes, of what he might do.

‘Don’t try and change the subject,’ he roared at her, using his voice like a weapon. Gnaeus had spent his twenties calling commands to chariot teams in the Circus Maximus or the Campus out by the river Tiber. His voice was a great crack of sound that made her want to cover her head. As he knew very well. He pushed past the table rather than steady it, so that it too fell with a crash. One of the slaves cried out in fear and two of the cooks entered the dining room at a run, convinced the estate was under attack. They gaped at the sight of the master holding Agrippina and shaking her. She had a glimpse of them bowing their heads and retreating. The room emptied and she was alone with her husband and his suspicious rage. In the distance, she thought she could hear her son wailing, wanting her.

‘Tell me why your brother wants you at his side each evening, why he thinks his wishes must overrule your own husband.’

‘Because they *do*!’ she shouted. ‘Gaius is emperor! If he wants me to walk at his side, don’t you see what it could mean for us? For our son? My brother rules all the lands and peoples of Rome, which the last time I checked includes me. So if he calls, I go to him.’

‘Just to walk,’ he echoed, his voice thick with suspicion.

Agrippina took a deep breath, trying to steady the fear he brought to the surface, like gas bubbling up in a marsh. Barbo was a wild thing when he was deep in his cups, when he had a full day and night of drinking behind him. His

eyes were bloodshot, his skin clammy. He slurred his words and the fist he raised and showed to her was a like a hammer, thick with hair. No knuckles, she noted. They had all been beaten in, years before. She knew his hands ached in the cold every winter.

She did not know if there was any restraint in him. He had frightened her when she was just thirteen. Being a mother did not seem to have freed her from that. She trembled like a leaf in a gale, hanging almost limp from his grip.

‘I have told you, Gnaeus, over and over! He asks me to lie alongside him when sleep does not come easily. Nothing more. He has Drusilla do the same. We tell him stories and Drusilla sings while I stroke his temples or his forehead. My brother has the weight of the empire on his shoulders, Gnaeus. If it is my role to help him sleep, I do it willingly.’

‘Not if it is against my command,’ he said. He increased the strength of his grip, so that she almost cried out. Only the fact that it was what he wanted made her bite her tongue. ‘I am your husband, Agrippina. You will see to my needs first.’

‘He is *princeps*, Gnaeus – first above all.’

He threw her down then, shoving her away. Agrippina scrambled up from the rug where she rolled, rubbing her arm. She had to find a way to calm him! It was as if she was trapped in a room with a savage dog. She would say anything to get away without being bitten.

‘You are worrying about nothing, Gnaeus. He has his new wife now, Claudilla. She shares his marriage bed. If he comes to his own rooms to find sleep after that, it’s no more than you do yourself. He likes to talk of our childhood, that’s all, when life was simpler – when my older

brothers were alive and Tiberius still had a son who would inherit the world. Can you blame him, really? Gaius did not ask to be emperor. He was *made* to rule, by murder and deceit, by treason. Sejanus raised him up! He wasn't trained to rule, the way some are. So is it such a surprise that he wants his sisters with him? His parents are dead, his brothers are gone. Drusilla and I are the only ones he trusts completely. Think of the advantages, Gnaeus! Just think for a moment, would you? To have the emperor's ear? Men have killed for less, many times.'

She saw she was piercing the fog of wine and wounded pride, or hoped she was. He was still glaring, but he seemed to be listening as he swayed and he had not laid hands on her again. Inspiration struck her.

'Where is that senator who wanted you brought to trial, Gnaeus? Gone. Found hanging in his private rooms – cut down by his own wife.'

Agrippina clenched her jaw for a moment, recalling her suspicions on the matter. She dared to lean forward, close enough to drop her voice to a murmur.

'I don't know how that happened, not for certain. I don't know if my brother gave the order, or whether the man hanged himself in shame when his petition was denied. I do not think his widow would be wearing mourning colours if you had not slept with her, Gnaeus. That much is certain. You know what else is certain? I went to my brother for help, to save you, to save our son. And he did so. I did not even know the senator, but if I had to choose between a rope for him or one for my son? I would ask again, a thousand times, no matter the cost. Be certain of that. Do not doubt my resolve, Gnaeus.'

'You . . . you dare to suggest . . .' He could not get the

words out, or make them work for him. A line of spittle shone on his chin, still stained in red wine.

'I am your husband!' Gnaeus shouted. 'I see you coming home and soaking in the bath. Washing his stink away! Will you deny it, Agri? You go into the city and a week passes! An entire week where your husband is abandoned, without a word, without an apology. Now you are going away on some mad voyage? Alone on board ship with your brother?'

'To fetch the ashes of our mother, Gnaeus, as I told you. He wants me there. Is that so hard to understand?'

'I won't allow it. I will lock you in your room first – and put slaves on the door. If Caligula wants you at his side, let him beg *my* permission, not yours!'

Agrippina stood straight, her lips thinned to a dark line.

'Husband, if you make him come for me, he will destroy you. My brother is . . . two men. Gaius Caesar can be sweet . . . and generous, but Caligula . . . you do not want to threaten him.'

He reached to grab her again, but she wrenched herself away. For a moment, Gnaeus was blind with anger, reacting as he might to a horse rearing or a soldier refusing an order. He struck her across the face with the back of his hand, moving in a blur, like a wolf snapping.

Agrippina went down with a crash, falling loose-limbed. Her husband was left staring, already regretting it. He had never hit her.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I shouldn't have lost my temper. Here, let me help you up.'

He took her by the same arm as before, so that she hissed in pain.

'Get off me, Barbo,' she said. *'Get off!'*

Her lip was bleeding, he saw. He felt the flames of anger still roiling and beating inside him, but the sight of her wounded mouth and eye was like water thrown on it all. He flushed deeply as she stood up, dabbing at herself with the back of one hand.

‘You know, Barbo, you’re like two men yourself, sometimes. You say only your friends call you Barbo, while you are Gnaeus to clients and your wife. But the truth is simpler, I think. Gnaeus Ahenobarbus can be a decent man – a bit of a fool, but honourable enough. Barbo, though? He is just a drunk.’

‘I’m sorry I hit you, Agri,’ he said through clenched teeth, ‘though I do not know another husband who would not take a rod to his wife after this last week! What did you expect, after the time you’ve already spent away from me, away from our son? There is your place, Agrippina, with that little boy. Not fawning on your brother each night.’

‘And again tonight,’ she said. ‘And on board ship, the night after that. I will be away for a few weeks, Barbo. And you will not complain, because if you do, I will not say I fell from my horse to make these bruises. No, I will say my husband gave them to me. And there will be praetorians at the door for you. Or do you think my brother, the emperor, will ignore the injuries to his sister?’

Gnaeus Ahenobarbus stood helplessly, opening and closing his hands as he sought something to hold and found nothing.

‘I’ll lock you in your room,’ he said.

Agrippina’s eyes grew hard.

‘And tonight, my brother will send a herald to ask why I have not come as he ordered. Will you take a knife to that one as well, Barbo? We had to sell land to pay the fine on

the last! No, I think you will say nothing, do nothing. You've had me to yourself for nine years. Perhaps it is time for a little freedom, don't you think?'

She touched the tender skin around her eye as she spoke, wincing at the last. Her husband breathed hard, but he had no more words. He turned away and walked out of the room. She watched him leave and stood still a moment longer, until she was sure he would not return with some final threat. Agrippina slumped then into a chair. She hated him, but he was all she had known for nine years of marriage, since childhood. She remembered Barbo better than her father! There was love there still, of a sort. There were a thousand memories of laughter and kindness, the sort of rough games he could play when he was sober and in a good mood. No marriage was all cruelty! She could not have borne it if it had been. So she felt her heart ease towards him, the moment he was not there. All while her face swelled.

No, something *bad* changed, she realised. It felt like a set of brass scales creaking apart, so that one side lifted as the other fell. Over nine years, her husband had grown old. His glories were all behind, while she was still in her first bloom. She rose from her seat. The emperor had called for her.

8

Agrippina had discovered she did not enjoy the open sea. She had sailed on a galley before in her childhood – her father had commanded a fleet of six in his campaigns in Germania. Her earliest memories had been the sweep of oars, with kindly officers showing her how the anchors worked. Yet it had always been close to shore, where a galley could skim like a gull to the beat of a drum.

Deep water was a very different experience. She'd noticed it as the oars were pulled in and the sails raised, at the prow and on the mast. The wind was filling them, which was about all she understood of it. It troubled her more that the motion of the ship changed completely. Just as she had been congratulated by the captain for having 'a good stomach', a great roll began. She'd felt nausea rising. It had been her brother Gaius who came to peer at her, looking worried.

'You might want to take a grip on the stern rail, by the oars,' he said with gruff affection. 'I promise you, it will pass.'

As if in a daze, Agrippina had let him lead her to the rear of the ship and placed her hands on a polished wooden spar. Two young crewmen were there to work the rudders. She felt sharp resentment at their obvious good humour.

Her vision blurred with tears brought on by the wind. When Agrippina had tried to thank her brother for his care, the contents of her stomach came pouring out. Most of it seemed to land on her dress. The rest of the day faded into misery. One of her personal servants stayed at her side, rubbing her back. Gaius even had the sail brought down and oars run out to give her respite for a few hours. That helped a little, but the sea roll was still there. She waved away all food and took in only white wine and water, watching it all gushing over the side moments later. She had ropes around her when she emptied her bladder, so she could not be lost overboard. Her bowels seemed to have clamped shut, which was a blessing.

The sun was setting by the time Gaius appeared at her elbow once again, standing clear so that he didn't have to breathe the odour of vomit. Agrippina's head was being beaten like a smith's anvil. She closed one eye to look up at him.

'Feeling better?' Gaius said. 'It will all ease, the moment we come in to the docks.'

A smile flickered about his mouth and she groaned, nodding. Half the crew seemed to find her illness amusing, though she could not have said why. It seemed exempt from compassion somehow, like a hangover.

'Are we close?' she managed. Her brother peered across the vast deck to a dark shape on his left hand. Agrippina tried to focus that far, squinting.

'The island of Pontia,' he said. 'The captain promised

we could make it in a straight run. He swore on his soul not to risk his emperor's precious life in the dark, with rocks and great fish. He has cut it fine, but the island is there.'

Agrippina saw a strange tension in her brother. The sails came down as they passed the outstretched arms of a long and shallow bay. The only sound was the swish of oars and the muffled drum, slowing as docks grew before them. She could see standing soldiers waiting there, as well as buildings, warehouses and a dozen fishing boats. She had never been to Pontia, but it looked a peaceful place.

'We'll go on to the island of Pandateria tomorrow, Agrippina, if the weather stays clear. Our mother's ashes deserve a proper funeral, a more noble ending. You'll find your stomach doesn't rebel again. It's a strange thing, but it happens only once in every voyage. Are you feeling a little better?'

'I am,' Agrippina replied, though she could barely string words together. Her head thumped in time with her heart and every movement of her neck made it worse. Still, she had a sense that she needed to pay attention. There was strain in the set of her brother's jaw and the way he held himself. Perhaps it was all the years she had spent with Barbo, but she could see he was coiled, troubled.

'We won't stay on Pontia for long, Agri. Just for tonight. I didn't even want to come here. But . . . it's right, I know it is. It is where they killed our brother Nero. He cut his throat on this little shit-speck island, far from home. And now I am emperor and all the world is mine, but if I could go back and undo that single hour . . . if I knew what I know now, I would do it, though it cost me all Rome. He was a friend to me, Agrippina. He was a hero to me. Half

the stories of our youth involve Nero! The way he loved games and would have us all learning new steps or rules, then beat all of us! Even our father could not match him, Agri! Nero was the best of us. He was never cruel to me, though some older brothers are. Drusus was sometimes, I remember. He used to laugh when I cried . . . Ah, it is all so long ago. Never Nero, though. I loved him, and he was killed for what? Because he stood in their way. Well, maybe I have learned from that.'

The galley crew were bustling as the vessel eased close to shore. Ropes were flung fore and aft and one of those waiting on land missed his catch, so that the rope dropped into the water. Under the emperor's eye, the officer said nothing as he pulled the rope back in, soaking wet and dripping all over the deck. His expression made it clear there would be retribution later, however. He cast again and the red-faced shore-man took it and wound it around an iron block. He stood to attention then, awaiting the gangplank and the marching sentries who would take position on the quayside, ready to protect the emperor. The wolf flag of Rome fluttered from the mast and only one man could fly that as his personal ensign. The whole island would know Caligula had come.

Agrippina breathed air redolent of seaweed, salt and old fish. She choked on it, but her brother didn't hear, or was just too deep in thought to care. The rowers had stowed their oars and the officers were on deck, ready for the emperor to disembark. He ignored them all, lost in recollection. Agrippina reached out and touched his arm, startling him.

'I should change my clothes,' she said. 'These ones are soiled.'

‘Nowhere private on a warship,’ he said.

The words came quickly, like a well-worn saying. It was all too true, however. Agrippina had bags and personal slaves with her, but they were huddled like little birds, waiting for the mistress to tell them where to go. Three hundred men worked oars below, while forty praetorians kept station on deck. Her brother had brought a warship to sea, not the plaything of a wealthy man. There was no room for cabins.

‘When Tiberius died . . .’ Gaius said. His voice was just a murmur and she turned to him in question. ‘I went to the consuls to learn the contents of the emperor’s will. In the name of peace and order, I made them break the seals early. I’d never heard it, Agri. Do you know what it said?’

She shook her head and he leaned in closer, oblivious to the smell of sick.

‘He made changes all the time, so no one would know if they were to inherit or not. It was just one of the little games Tiberius played, to keep his favourites in line. I didn’t *care*, d’you understand? I was the oldest living male in the bloodline of Augustus. Our mother was granddaughter to the emperor. I *would* be emperor, or I’d bring the whole senate down around me. I had the praetorians, Agrippina. With Prefect Macro backing me, the senators and the consuls would bow like reeds before a gale. I knew all that, but still I found my heart beating fast to hear the last words of Tiberius, his very last chance to move the world.’

His voice dropped further when he saw torches being lit on the docks, bathing the ship in flickering gold. Night had come. The whole vessel moved gently on a swell, but it had been tamed. It reminded Agrippina of the hawks she had known, hooded and yet alert.

‘He declared me heir, but not alone,’ Gaius said. ‘I was to rule *with another*, as equals.’

He shook his head and Agrippina felt a spasm of fear cut through her thoughts. Was she in danger? This island had already claimed one of their line. If Tiberius had named her in his will, her life might end on those very docks. No, Gaius would not have brought her so far just to kill her. More likely she might be taken to whatever cell her brother had known and just left there, never to see her baby son again. Agrippina began to panic. She found she was sweating, her breath coming faster.

‘There was a little boy with me on Capreae,’ Gaius went on, unaware of her fears. ‘Tiberius’ own grandson, brought there to keep him safe when others like his son and our brothers were dying off. His name was Gemellus – a twin, though his brother had died. He used to laugh, Agri! He had such a bright way about him when he arrived. I saw all that . . . taken from him. I saw things . . . I will not speak of them.’

Something opened like darkness between them. No one in the world would have interrupted her brother and Agrippina hid her relief and just breathed until he spoke again.

‘He was there with me for a few months and at the end, they said he had been held underwater in one of the pools, that it was a terrible accident. Gemellus was . . . ruined on that island. I tried to speak to him when he was being taken home. His eyes were quite blank, and all the laughter had been silenced.’

Agrippina touched one hand to her mouth, horrified by just a glimpse of what he had endured. There was madness in him when he looked back. She thought then of his

young wife and wondered if Claudilla knew the breadth and depth of the task that lay ahead. Her brother was damaged still. She did not yet know if he could be healed.

Gaius glanced at his sister and saw how strongly the story had affected her. He wiped roughly at his eyes, forcing a grin.

‘I talk too much, Agrippina. It was Gemellus named in the old man’s will, to rule as my equal. Can you believe that? I had both consuls annul that will in the same hour. I would have done the same if Gemellus had been whole, but the boy was . . . the boy I knew could not hold the posts of a man. I found where Tiberius had put him: Pontia, where our brother was killed. I sent my own doctors to be sure. It is as I said, still. His mind has gone. You’ll see.’

‘That boy is here? On this island?’ Agrippina said.

Her brother nodded.

‘A young man now, but yes.’ He hesitated then, as if he wanted to say more, but clamped his lips over the words. ‘Come. You should see.’

He offered his hand and Agrippina took it in a sort of daze. She saw her brother did not care she needed desperately to bathe and find clean clothes. Her brother expected her to follow and so she followed, glancing back at her personal slaves to bring them scurrying in her wake. Brother and sister descended the walkway down to the docks. Horns blared there and legionaries waited to be inspected under a flapping banner. For some, it would be the only time in their life they saw the emperor in the flesh.

Agrippina hid her dismay as Gaius walked her down a line of polished and shining soldiers. Her hair was wild, her dress covered in drying sick. Her temples throbbed

and her make-up was smudged. All she could do was hold her head up and walk alongside.

The island of Pontia had seemed much smaller out at sea. In the moonlight, Agrippina saw a wide stone road leading up from the bay. Horses had been brought for the emperor and his senior officers. She was led to a mule provided for her comfort. She sat on a thick blanket, legs primly together and a new cloak over all. Her slaves were still distressed at her bedraggled state. They plucked and brushed at their mistress as best they could, walking with the mule as they made their way into the hills.

Great crags loomed against the night, blotting out the stars and sheltering the bay where the galley berthed. Agrippina had looked back once to see the crew already scrubbing and oiling every part of the vessel, making it right for the emperor's return. She shook her head in wonder. Her father had known both fierce pride and affection from his soldiers, but that was a long time ago.

She and her brother passed homes on either side of the road, some grand and others somewhat ramshackle, all huddled together in clusters. Sleepy families stood in doorways, rubbing their eyes and yawning as they waited to catch a glimpse of the emperor. Some of them called blessings, but most remained silent. They might have cheered during the day. In the dark, it all felt like a dream.

A mile up from the port, the air was colder than before. They reached some sort of turning circle and Agrippina felt her mule taken by a groom. The senior officer of the island jumped down, rushing over to help Gaius dismount. The building he had brought the imperial party to was squat and wide, set against a dark cliff with just a small

door. Agrippina thought it was an ugly little place, too small for its purpose. She feared what she might find inside. For the first time, she wished Gaius had just left her on the galley. She took his hand when he came to offer it.

One of the praetorians had carried a shuttered lamp up from the port. He removed the side panel and golden light sprang out. Agrippina glanced at him then and realised it was a face she knew. The helmet hid his red hair, but she was certain. The name returned to her: Italus. She gathered her cloak more tightly. Agrippina hadn't known he was on board, though of course she'd spent the day heaving over the stern. It was ridiculous, but she took comfort from his presence in that place, where all else was so very strange.

The emperor had to duck his head as he passed beneath the lintel. There was no light inside, Agrippina noticed. She hoped that was just the late hour. The idea of prisoners being denied even oil lamps from sunset to dawn made her shudder. As she followed her brother, she had the sense of entering a tomb.

Inside, the praetorians walked ahead, alert to any threats. She noticed Italus held his lamp in his left hand, his right always near the hilt of his sword. She felt her nervousness ease.

They passed two empty cells in the outermost room, then half a dozen more that seemed to have been cut into the rock. The air had grown chill and Agrippina realised they had gone beyond the outline of the building outside. The cells there had been hacked out of the raw mountain, no doubt by generations of prisoners. It meant the only possible escape was through the door she had come in.

Cell after cell was empty, briefly lit and left behind as

darkness spilled back in. The little lamp revealed a final wall, marked with chisel strikes, where water seeped through a crack. The ceiling was lower there and both praetorians removed their helmets. There were no cells beyond and Centurion Italus turned to cast light through the last set of iron bars.

A young man stood there, right at the bars as the light fell on him. They all jumped instinctively and one of the praetorians raised a hand to fend off evil, making horns with his fingers. He turned the gesture into a thump that rattled the bars and sent the pale figure leaping back.

‘Gemellus?’ Agrippina heard her brother whisper. He turned to the praetorians. ‘Keep the light steady, would you? Gemellus, do you remember me?’

Agrippina watched as a skeletal young man sidled up to the bars once again, drawn to the light as if he could not help himself. The prisoner was corpse-pale, his hair grown long. Sores marked his skin in patches, making Agrippina shudder. He stared at her brother for a long time, then frowned. She could see the effort in his face.

‘It’s Gaius,’ her brother prompted. ‘You knew me on the island. Do you remember?’

The younger man shook his head. He opened his mouth to reply and Agrippina could see just a few brown teeth remained.

‘Gai . . . us,’ Gemellus repeated.

His eyes were huge, but there was no spark in them, no sign of thought or quick emotion. He reminded Agrippina of a bull stunned for slaughter. Her gaze slid to a wooden bucket in the corner of the cell. It was full, with spatters all around it. Whatever lay within gleamed as lamplight struck the surface. She flinched from the sight, wanting nothing

more than to run out into the clean air. How long had he been there? Months? Years?

‘The emperor is dead, Gemellus,’ her brother went on. It seemed to be important to him that he was understood. He leaned almost through the bars, gripping them. ‘Tiberius is dead.’

The prisoner nodded at that, the gesture going on and on until Agrippina thought he might never stop.

‘I am the emperor now,’ Gaius said softly. ‘Neither you nor I will ever have to fear him again. I thought you would want to know that.’

Agrippina heard his voice break and looked in astonishment at her brother. The praetorians could hear every word, of course. She began to think how she might distract him. Whatever he had suffered was in the past – and the past hurt no one, any more than last year’s winter could make them cold.

‘Calig . . . ula,’ the prisoner said suddenly, as if the word had bubbled up inside him.

Gaius smiled.

‘You remember! Yes. Though I am Gaius Caesar now – princeps.’

‘Am I . . . going home?’ the voice whispered.

Agrippina could see hope in him. She glanced again at her brother.

‘Yes,’ Gaius said. ‘I will take you home. Open this door, centurion. Let my friend walk out of this foul place.’

The prisoner began to weep, a keening sound. He staggered back to the bars and stood trembling as the centurion found the key on a nail and wrestled with rusted iron until something moved or snapped. The door creaked apart. Gaius stood back as he understood how filthy Gemellus

actually was. It fell to the lower-ranking praetorian to take him by one skinny arm.

Agrippina struggled to walk slowly as they headed out. She could see a patch of moonlight and wanted to run to it. She could smell the one they had rescued, she realised. His breath, his hair, his skin. It all reeked from too long forgotten in a hole. More, she could hear him. He sobbed as he shuffled along, blinded by his own tears.

They came out into the night air, to the soldiers and personal slaves as well as the mounts they had brought up. Gemellus gave a great cry and fell to his knees. Agrippina found herself gulping, grateful to be free and away from the horror of endless darkness.

She looked across at her brother as Gaius wiped his eyes and stood straight, the muscles in his jaw clenching. Agrippina winced for him. She looked back at the young man they had brought out.

‘You know what I must do,’ Gaius said softly.

He spoke to her. She did not know if he needed her approval, but she had guessed when he told her about Tiberius’ will. Gaius was her brother, after all.

‘I know,’ she said.

He reached out and touched her on the shoulder, thanking her.

‘Centurion Italus,’ Gaius said. ‘You are to make it quick, do you understand? As painless as you can. Give him peace, centurion, on my order.’

The red-haired man bowed in reply. He glanced at Agrippina then and inclined his head. He drew his short sword and approached the kneeling figure.

Gemellus turned at the steps and seemed to understand immediately. He was trembling, like a whipped dog on a

cold day. Yet he looked over to her brother and held his gaze.

‘Thank you,’ he said with enormous effort, the words almost clear. The sword reached across his bare throat and was drawn back, cutting deep. His eyes filled with darkness and he fell forward, still at last.

‘He laughed all the time,’ Gaius whispered. ‘There was such joy in him.’

Agrippina had the sense her brother was close to weeping and she cleared her throat.

‘Come,’ she said for the benefit of the soldiers listening. ‘This was done with honour. Let us head back to the ship.’

Once again, Gaius reached out and patted her arm.

‘Thank you, sister. If we set off at dawn tomorrow, we can reach Pandateria before evening, to exhume Mother’s ashes,’ he said. ‘Then maybe three or four days of rowing back against the wind. I hope you won’t be ill again.’ He let one of the praetorians help him mount, his brow creased in thought. ‘I’m glad you are here. I am . . . more whole when you are with me. Is it strange to say so? My thoughts are less turbulent in your presence. Does your husband say the same?’

‘I don’t believe he does, no,’ she said, uncomfortable at the direction his thoughts had taken. She had just witnessed a demonstration of his power, after all.

‘I’m sorry to hear that. Your son Lucius, though? He is well?’

She could not help smiling, just at hearing the name aloud. Her brother stared, his gaze as blank as the young man she had just seen killed.

‘He is well, brother – a chubby little boy, growing like a weed.’

‘I’m glad to hear it. Perhaps I will have a uniform made for him, like the one I had.’

‘In a few years! He cannot even stand at the moment.’

‘When you are ready, then. Let me know. You bring me peace, Agrippina. It is the least I can do for you.’

Agrippina took her seat on the mule, with her personal slaves walking alongside. Her brother did not look back at the body they left behind. Clicking to his horse, Gaius led their little group down to the port.

There, on a moonlit dock, the prefect of the VI Ferrata – the iron legion – presented the emperor with a small chest. Agrippina saw Gaius hesitate, but then he bade his personal guard lay it down. She watched as her brother opened the lid and beckoned a lamp closer. They looked on ashes and chips of bone. Gaius stirred it with his thumb.

‘Just like sand, or grains of dust,’ he muttered. ‘It doesn’t look like much, but Nero deserves a proper place of rest. He would have been emperor, had he lived. He was my brother.’

He choked on the last, standing up and walking away. It was left to his men to close the chest and bring it on board the galley waiting on an ink-black sea.

Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus was a fighting man. That was what those whoresons were about to learn. It was true he had been drinking all day, but he was used to that. He could hear a slur had entered his speech and he could see smiles on the faces of the three younger men, but that was an advantage. They should have been wary.

They’d come out into the street readily enough, pushing and laughing at the old bull as he’d flexed his shoulders

and cracked his neck. Gnaeus felt anger turning the wine to fumes. That was his secret, he thought blearily. Anger gave him strength. In his youth, other men seemed to sense it when it ran like oil in his veins. Well, he *was* an old bull! Young fools were quick and sure, but he had horns. He held up his fists and they laughed at him.

‘Give him what he wants, then!’ one of them said. ‘Teach the old bastard to mind his manners.’

Another of them saw a chance and darted in, faster than Gnaeus could turn. A thunderous blow rocked his head to one side and his own swing met only empty air. He growled, drawing on his anger.

‘Oh, he’s wild now! Look at his eyes. You’ve done it now, Deci! Hit him again!’

They were all laughing. Gnaeus could see their teeth and red throats. He wasn’t hurting, though, not really. He could still stand. That was all that mattered. While he was on his feet, he was still a threat.

One of them stepped in close to jab at him, splitting his lip and sending blood spattering. Gnaeus grabbed the man’s tunic, then clubbed with his free fist, smashing his face over and over. The others got very busy then, leaping and yelling, clinging to his arms. The one he was hitting slipped and they all crashed down onto the stones of the road. For some reason, Gnaeus felt that more sharply than anything else.

They were on him before he could get up, kicking and stamping while he tried to protect himself. Light flashed as they took out their frustration. After a time, they were all panting like hounds on a hunt. Two of them were grinning through red teeth. The other was the one he had grabbed and battered. That one stood dabbing at himself. The

man's nose was definitely broken and one eye was swelling closed.

The little group looked down on Gnaeus as he considered whether it was time to stand and whether he could. More patrons had come out to watch the fight and Gnaeus heard one of them swear.

'You fools. Don't you know who that is?' he asked.

Gnaeus tried to smile at the thought of their expressions when they heard. He had been someone once.

'No, who is it?' one of the brawlers asked in irritation.

'Barbo. He was a charioteer! What, are you too young? He used to be famous.'

'So?'

'Well, his wife is the emperor's sister, son. I'd run, if I were you, before the vigiles arrive and take you up.'

The three young men vanished into the busy street, their running footsteps dwindling. Gnaeus felt the aches and pains of the beating as he struggled up. His hip was bruised from the fall. He thought a rib might be cracked and his lip was already a great fat thing. Yet nothing hurt as much as having Agrippina's name used to save him. He sighed as he rose to his feet. The tavern-keeper was watching nervously. Gnaeus thought he was the one who had spoken to his attackers.

'Are you all right?' the man asked.

Yes, it was the same voice. Gnaeus wondered if he should thank him and decided it was beneath his dignity. Like his bones, that too was bruised. He patted his hip and was pleased his pouch of coin remained.

'I will be, when you fetch more wine.'

He held up a silver sesterce. Whatever the man had been going to say was lost as he nodded and went back in.

Gnaeus looked over to where the street ended and the great space of the forum opened. The light was different there to the narrow streets around. He frowned. His wife was still sailing with her brother, neglecting her duties at home. She'd become so beautiful, somehow, while he aged and creaked and weakened. It was all so unfair. He felt something curdling in his stomach and kneaded the flesh there. Perhaps it was just a bad cup of wine. There was always one in the first dozen. Well-known fact, that.

9

Agrippina stood straight-backed and silent, staring out across a view full of wonders. The day was hot and still as spring gave way to summer. The Palatine hill that looked over the forum was high enough and old enough to give a sense of the entire city around them. The very cave where a wolf had suckled twin boys was said to have been part of the Palatine. It was older than Rome – and Emperor Augustus had constructed a series of palaces on its flat crest, both for his own glory and the city he had remade over fifty years.

She felt an itch grow on her cheek and ignored it, though it maddened her. Barbo had left bruises again and she'd been forced to cover up. She knew from experience how one careless fingernail could undo all her artistry. Today was a time of discipline, she reminded herself. She wore a dark blue stola of incredibly fine weave. Her hair was held in a web of jewelled pins under a cowl. Her eyes were dark with kohl and her cheeks dusted so they shone gold in the sun. The results pleased her and she had already noted the

effect on those she encountered. Men and women tended to stare when they saw her. Vanity was for silly, unmarried women, but it pleased her even so.

Agrippina drank in the scenes passing by the balcony of the imperial palace, watching with a sense of awe. She'd had to make excuses for Barbo's absence to her brother. Just the thought was enough to make her grind her teeth. She hated to apologise! It wasn't that Barbo had no sense of duty or responsibility, but when he fell under his dark moods, he would not rouse himself, not even for an earthquake. Instead, his wife was the one who had to lie and offer regrets on his behalf. There was little honour in that.

Agrippina glanced at her brother and his little wife Claudilla, noting the swell of womb that had done more to heal Gaius than anything else. If Gaius had been broken once, that determined young woman was mending him, piece by piece. Even when he summoned his sisters to sleep by his side, there was less disturbance. He woke less often, where before he had wrapped himself in sweat-stained sheets and shrieked in the night.

Below, the signifers of twenty-eight legions marched together for the mother and brothers of an emperor. *There* was power! Her brother had summoned them from as far away as Syria and Gaul. Laws as old as Rome forbade the legions themselves from coming too close to the eternal city. That was the hearth and responsibility of the praetorians. Yet they sent their banner-carriers and four senior centurions. Each signifer held aloft the symbol that inspired five thousand legionaries to fight and die. Agrippina saw bulls and suns and numbers embroidered on shining panels. She didn't know if they would be interred that day or returned to their legions. It spoke of nations,

of the empire, of a world brought to that place, all on her brother's command.

Caligula had planned it all in a whirlwind of energy over the previous months. The mausoleum of Augustus had been opened and prepared, the gardens there all replanted and made new. Praetorians patrolled the place out on the Campus day and night. Some citizens walked as lovers there in normal times, enjoying the beauty. Augustus had chosen the spot well during his reign, close by a bend in the river Tiber.

Agrippina could only wonder at her brother's achievement. He had grown into the role fate and violence had won for him. Gaius stood that day with their father's brother Claudius and his young wife Messalina, explaining aspects of the procession to them both. Agrippina watched Gaius out of the corner of her eye and she was not displeased. Messalina's sharp gaze darted everywhere, weighing wealth and influence as some women will. Agrippina disliked her on instinct and wondered if her gentle uncle would regret his hasty marriage. As for Gaius, though . . . ? She thought he wore his power well.

It was Gaius who had retrieved the ashes of both brothers as well as those of her mother. They were all the bloodline of Augustus and so he had brought the best masons in Rome to cut new tombs and granite markers in the floor of the mausoleum. Whatever else his reign would achieve, it would begin by putting right the indignities of the past.

Agrippina saw three golden urns coming round the bend in the road. The crowd began to sing a tune she remembered from her youth, a hymn to Juno and mothers. She felt herself blinking as the notes rose from the

crowd like scent on the breeze. No, she would not weep. It either mattered a great deal or not at all. She could not be certain which it was. Agrippina did not try to tease out the emotions that stirred in her. Most of it was pride in her brother, for all he had done in a short time.

‘There they are,’ she heard Gaius murmur to his wife. The entire procession was to his plan, of course. She saw tears glittering in his eyes. He had always wept too easily. Gaius gestured for more wine and a servant filled the cups. Only Claudius waved his away, Agrippina noticed. The older man was uncomfortable in the sun and looked back longingly to the gloom of the rooms they had left.

Seeing the perfection of the marching ranks, Agrippina was struck by a suspicion. The last funeral had ended in chaos and violence, but that no longer made sense to her. She knew Gaius much better by then and it did not seem to her that he would have allowed a riot to begin. She wondered if his own instigators had started it, marking the end of Tiberius in death and blood rather than honour. If true, it was a subtlety she had not known Gaius possessed.

This day was entirely different, almost joyous. Her brother had distributed bread and wine at sun-up, feeding the entire city so they could endure. He had also left huge purses of silver with praetorian officers, to distribute as they saw fit. The gesture was one they would associate with a Triumph, where coins were flung to cheering crowds. This day was to be a celebration of a life – as a granddaughter of Augustus and two of her sons were interred in the family tomb. Her father Germanicus was already in that hallowed place. Agrippina realised with a start that almost every person on the balcony would rest there, if they managed not to be exiled or murdered in

some far-off land. Claudius would surely join his brother, while Gaius, Drusilla and herself would lie alongside the parents they had known, perhaps with their spouses, even their children. The thought disturbed her, though she supposed it was natural enough to consider death at such a time.

Agrippina saw fresh tears being shed by her brother's wife. Claudilla's father too was snuffling. He would have some other tomb, at least. Neither one had known her mother and older brothers! She found herself staring coldly at them both. Agrippina dabbed her eyes when Gaius glanced at her, but there were no tears of her own. There was just no sign of the woman Agrippina remembered in the urn Gaius had commissioned. Nor could she see Nero with his quick wit, or Drusus with his sports and love of horses.

Her mother had been accused of plotting against Tiberius and paid a terrible price. Agrippina felt something cold swell as she recalled that day of her youth, a public beating with a mob howling and darting in. The praetorians then had been forced to defend her as they took her to exile. As it was, the woman for whom Agrippina had been named had lost an eye. She had never seen her mother again. Tiberius had forgotten Agrippina the elder, or allowed her to be forgotten. She'd passed from the world, her ashes buried in a cheap little pot. None of her jewelry had survived her disgrace either. That still rankled, as Agrippina recalled a turquoise brooch she had always wanted for herself.

As with the bones of Nero from the island of Pontia, bringing that urn home had obsessed her brother. Agrippina had heard there was a cult in Judea that treated tombs

and bones with extraordinary reverence, as if they still held some part of the loved ones lost. Perhaps he was one of those Christ-followers. She couldn't really understand that sort of love, not really. Oh, Gaius talked well of a son's duty and restoring family honours, but none of it brought ashes back to life. It was true their mother and brothers had been denied proper funerals. Perhaps there was something in that.

As emperor, Gaius had spent vast amounts of time and talents of gold from the treasury in planning every detail. Her brother knew the working of the senate and the imperial bureaucracy – and it seemed he knew how to make it jump. In its way, that too was a demonstration of his power, a reminder that what he said mattered, mattered.

Agrippina looked over the edge of the balcony to where two dozen priests and priestesses walked behind the urns. The gods were represented by their most senior clergy and hundreds of their acolytes. Coming around the bend behind those, the entire senate walked with heads bowed, honouring the mother and older brothers of the emperor. Agrippina glanced in interest at Claudilla's father as they began to pass, but Senator Silanus made no move to head down and join them.

She tried to put aside the irritation that grated on her, though she knew the source only too well. They were almost all couples, while she stood alone. Her sister Drusilla was there, standing with her new husband in a dress of dark blue that flattered her figure. Caligula had granted her petition for divorce and she had married again with unseemly speed, hungry to have children. Agrippina eyed the new man at her side, a forgettable figure whose

name . . . no, she could not bring it to mind. His family had produced almost a dozen brothers and sisters. That was all that mattered.

A high-pitched cry broke her frowning concentration, as almost nothing else could. Agrippina looked back into the rooms behind. The bright sun didn't reach there, but she could see the wet nurse rocking her son, pressing his little face into the swell of her breast. Lucius had been yelling before, but still fussed and would not feed. Agrippina could see the wailing was putting her brother's teeth on edge. With a quick gesture, she called the woman out onto the balcony and took the child.

Her son looked at his mother and the squalling just stopped. Agrippina stared into light brown eyes, feeling more in that moment than she had for the entire procession. She felt another gaze on her and glanced up to see both Gaius and Claudilla smiling.

'Ah, sister, I wish you could see your expression,' he said. 'How our mother would love to see us this day! How proud Nero and Drusus would be! You with your son . . . and me . . .' He ran a hand down Claudilla's womb, patting it. She leaned into him. 'With our son or daughter growing.'

'It will be a boy, I'm certain,' Claudilla said.

Agrippina felt a spike of irritation. As if it was somehow her achievement. The younger woman seemed dreamy with the joy of it and Gaius indulged her whims, feeding her honeyed biscuits and rose-flavoured sweets.

'I'm just sorry your husband could not be here,' Gaius said.

Agrippina felt her neck stiffen as she rocked the baby. She was not certain how much her brother knew, but he was no fool. She had found Barbo that morning, blind

drunk and snoring. Agrippina had slapped his face and even stuck a pin into his hand to try and bring him back, so important was it. He'd begun roaring curses then. He'd sprung up like a wounded bear, kicked a chair that tangled in his legs and then knocked her aside and slammed a door in her face, all to collapse on a different bed. She knew he wouldn't remember any of it, or at least would pretend not to. Either way, it meant another day of excuses and saying he was too ill to come to her mother's funeral.

To explain that absence, she'd had to claim he was close to death. Nothing else would do, not when the emperor himself expected his presence. Of course, she'd said all that the night before, when Barbo had begun drinking. She'd pleaded with him as he sank into a stupor, that if he went on, he'd never manage to get up in the morning and would put them all in danger.

Agrippina adjusted the child's weight, giving herself time to think. Dust and oil covered her most recent bruises. She dared give no sign of what she endured, not when she considered how much Gaius had done in just a short time. Her brother was quite capable of making a judgement on the matter, just as he had sentenced Gemellus to death or allowed Drusilla to take a new husband. An emperor had the power, if he chose to use it. Agrippina made herself smile.

'Gnaeus wanted so much to be here. I'll have to describe everything when his fever breaks. If I know him, it will be a few days yet. Honestly, I thought he might not live. The heat was so high, he was quite out of his wits.'

The emperor looked satisfied.

'I will send wine to him, or perhaps a matched pair of horses. Does he still ride?'

Gaius caught the frown of confusion in the young wife at his side.

‘Oh my dear, you should have seen him when he raced! The crowd would chant “Bar-bo!” as he went by. That was it, wasn’t it, Agrippina? “Barbo”? Yes – for Ahenobarbus, of course. He raced for the Greens in the Circus. I only saw him once when I was small, but I remember it well.’

Agrippina bowed her head in thanks.

‘He loves his last racing quad still – they are getting rather old, but he rides when he is well. Thank you, though, brother. I will tell him you asked after him. That will be enough to help him recover, I am certain.’

On the road, the procession had moved on, the blare of horns fading. It would wend its way through half the city, letting the people see, before heading out to the mausoleum. Agrippina knew there would be services and dedications there, as well as food and drink for a smaller group of celebrants. The final service would be in the coolness of the inner tomb, with high priests of Jupiter and Juno to bless the ashes and place them in the earth for all eternity. Agrippina could have killed Barbo in that moment for leaving her alone, but she could give no sign of her irritation, not with Gaius watching. He too seemed to relax as the funeral procession dwindled into the distance.

‘I have been thinking, Agrippina . . .’ he said.

She noticed him glance at his wife. Claudilla nodded and Agrippina felt tension tighten across her neck and shoulders.

‘Claudilla and I have been thinking. You should be present for the birth, when it comes. I would like that. It will mean moving you closer to me, but I have a surprise there, I think.’

He was beaming, Agrippina realised, worry spiking in her. She began to respond, but he went on, forcing her to stop.

‘I have purchased a house for you – and another for Drusilla here. On the street below.’

Agrippina winced as Drusilla gave a shriek of delight. She rocked her son a little faster as he began to cry, sensing something was wrong.

Gaius pointed over the edge of the balcony.

‘I have kept the secret for weeks, Agrippina. There – those two houses. I had the doors painted matching blue. It means you will be neighbours. I have staff in place, but of course you can bring your own slaves in if you’d prefer. The homes are yours, or I suppose, your husbands’. He frowned then, remembering. ‘I really wanted Gnaeus to be here today. I made sure there were stables round the back. . . Fine, as he is not here, I will say I bought a matched quad of greys from the finest breeder in Rome. He assured me all four are of the same bloodline as his Castor and Pollux, the very best. I had to outbid the owners of two teams, Agrippina! They will not disappoint him.’

In squealing joy, Drusilla stepped past her sister, kissing the emperor on his neck and then both his hands, bouncing on the tips of her toes like a little girl. Her husband had more dignity, or at least more care. No man could touch the emperor without his explicit permission. Gaius had not given that, so Drusilla’s husband could only bow and murmur astonished, blushing thanks.

Agrippina found herself a single point of stillness on the balcony. The crowds had milled and spread onto the road, their normal lives resuming after the enforced stillness of the procession. They peered up at the little group

on the balcony above the road, gathering below. Agrippina could hear voices calling the gods to bless the emperor and his new family. Yet she felt only a sense of desperate danger.

‘You are too kind, Gaius, really . . . I only wish . . .’

‘Please don’t refuse, Agri! I know I haven’t spoken about it with you. I know your husband might not want to come into the city, though he spends so many days and nights here, I think he must love it really.’

She bit her lower lip, wondering again how much Gaius knew of her relationship. If she brought Barbo into the city, the details of their life would be all over Rome in a day. He was just too angry, too brash, too loud. Only the fact that they lived twenty miles from the walls gave them anything like privacy.

‘I really can’t accept,’ she said, hearing the quaver in her own voice and trying to crush it. Her voice hardened as she went on. ‘When you call me, I come, brother. You know that. I would not be happy in the city, not at the moment. Lucius is still so young and I ride my own horses every day. Really, it is too much. It’s so generous, I really am touched by it, more than you could know. But I can’t, Gaius.’

Agrippina saw Claudilla looked stricken as she turned to the emperor. The young woman’s expression asked Gaius to make it right, this thing that had somehow gone wrong. Gaius took on the same dour cast, his brow furrowing. Yet it was her sister Drusilla who spoke first.

‘It is a gift, Agri! Don’t you want to live next door to me? We could be in and out of each other’s houses all day, visiting and talking. It will be like when we were children.’

Perhaps she didn’t notice the thoughtful expression her

husband adopted, or was too newly married to understand, but Agrippina did. Barbo would go berserk if she tried to force that cosy little arrangement on him! Agrippina flailed for a solution. It seemed all eyes were on her and she clenched her jaw in response.

‘I know you don’t want me to be unhappy, Gaius, Drusilla. I have my home on the Via Appia – and it suits me very well. If you want, I’ll take the house, of course. I’ll furnish it and stay there whenever I am in Rome . . . but with your permission, Gaius, I’ll keep my home as well.’

She made herself stop. Her brother could order absolutely anything. If he insisted, she would have to bow to his will, even if it cost her a marriage. She waited, trying to ignore the pleading look Claudilla turned to Gaius. His gaze flickered between them, but Agrippina knew he could ignore them both if he wanted. Like her, there was a coldness hidden deep. Perhaps Claudilla would soften it in time, but it was still there then.

‘All right, Agrippina, as you say,’ Gaius said, his disappointment obvious.

Tension seemed to flow out of that tight little group. Claudilla made a moue, pursing her lips. The emperor kissed her as a parent might kiss away a hurt.

‘No, if Agrippina wants to stay away, I understand. She is a mother now, after all. A boy like Lucius needs trees to climb.’

‘You’ll have me, though, Gaius,’ Drusilla said. ‘Will you show me the new house? I can’t wait to see it.’ She seemed flustered. Her brother looked crushed at Agrippina’s refusal. Having Drusilla at his call was apparently not much comfort in comparison.

Agrippina stood very still, resisting the pressure to make

it right. If she said a word, she'd end up a prisoner in that house with Barbo's rage – and her nights no longer her own.

Unseen, she pinched the child in her arms. He began to yell, giving her an excuse to take him inside.

'He needs . . .' she said, not troubling to finish. They all nodded even so. Agrippina thanked the emperor and his wife, then her sister and her husband, before finally approaching her uncle.

'Will I see you at the service?' she asked.

Claudius nodded, as amiable a man as she had ever known. Whatever drove Gaius was missing in him, she realised. Perhaps that was why she felt so calm in his presence. She turned to find his wife Messalina watching her in a sort of confusion.

'Your brother spent a long time finding that house,' she said. It was a rebuke and delivered so low Agrippina thought no one but her uncle had heard. Claudius shook his head.

'Now, now, Agrippina knows what's right for her, I'm s-sure.'

'Thank you, uncle,' Agrippina said, kissing him on the cheek. 'I knew you'd understand.' She ignored the hot gaze of Messalina as she turned away.

IO

The city was sleepy in the afternoon heat. It hadn't rained in weeks and the air felt baked, the ground dry. Augustus had built more than a hundred public baths during his long reign – and they were all full each morning. A secondary market had sprung up for entry tokens, with the poorest claiming a spot in the early hours, then selling it on to wealthier citizens when they arrived after dawn. For Emperor Gaius Julius Caesar, it was a symbol of the city he loved: noisy, raucous, bursting at the seams.

He looked out over the stone seats of the senate house. The forum outside was busy with people and trade, bustling to and from work, driving animals to slaughter or calling wares to sell. He could hear them like the sea, a constant murmur as background to the affairs of state. Like bees perhaps, or scurrying ants. He wondered how different they were from the senators he swept his gaze across. Those men wore better robes than the plebeians, without a doubt. They knew their Virgil and their Homer – and some of them could even command a legion in the

field. Or perhaps their fathers had done. That was almost the same.

They listened to Gaius Caesar that day, however. He sometimes wondered if they ever reflected on what a glorious farce it all was. In the centuries of the Republic, the senate had been the font of all laws. A century before, his namesake Julius Caesar had drawn that ancient authority to himself. He had been ‘imperator’, a leader on the field. He had been ‘dictator’, with the right to divine worship. He had not called himself ‘emperor’, however. In those days Romans still feared the return of kings.

Even Augustus had rejected the formal title, though ‘princeps’ meant the same. If no one stood above, that was imperial rule. Tiberius though, had hardly bothered to play the game. He had been an emperor, whichever name they used.

Gaius needed his senate, to run the regions and bureaucracies of an empire. He needed them to command in battle, to build new roads, new bridges, entire new cities. The emperor smiled at his little bees, all watching to see what he would say. Some men still called Rome a republic, but the pretence was threadbare. Gaius was princeps. He was emperor. If the senate crossed him, he would spill all their blood.

He sighed, taking a moment to mop his brow. The pad of cloth and the gesture would remind them of Tiberius. It was in such little things that he ruled them. He leaned on the lectern, on wood worn smooth by a thousand hands. It had been part of a Carthaginian warship once. Cato the Elder had stood where he stood and ended every speech with ‘Carthago delenda est!’ – Carthage must be destroyed. As it had been. Gaius and his ancestors had made a peace

of Rome – where millions lived and worked, giving honour to the eternal city. Beyond the boundaries of civilisation, men still lived as savages, painted blue or red and sacrificing their young to pagan gods. It was almost a sacred duty . . .

He smiled to see some of the senators moving uncomfortably, daring to glance at one another. He had kept them waiting, his face perfectly blank as he observed the cliques and factions, the weak and strong among them. Men revealed so much in silence. They were like children, sometimes. Well, they could still learn discipline.

‘You have honoured me with prayers for my health,’ he began, his voice gentle. ‘I thank you all. I do not believe there is a collection of minds as wise anywhere in the world in this moment. Or so many fools.’

There was a murmur at that and he smiled, making sure they could see his teeth.

‘I have seen the treasury, gentlemen. I know the sums that come in from our tax collectors, with every chit and token accounted, every lamb and bushel of grain marked on a tally. We take a tithe when a ship is bought and sold, when a house is raised – and in return, we give the people clean, dry roads to reach their markets. We pay the vigiles to solve the murders or put out fires before they spread. We pay twenty-eight legions to win new lands and defend all we have. And more! And more! We use those funds to pay copyists to record the works of Greece and Rome, from the plays of Aeschylus to the discussions of this very chamber. For one single work of greatness, a hundred lambs will be sacrificed to make vellum pages softer than a child’s cheek. We do this for them, so that they know our laws, so that there is more to their lives than just stuffing

their mouths. And more! And more! We build temples for them to worship the gods, so that they do not lose themselves in brutish spite or the sterile arguments of the Greeks. We deliver silver in chests to our governors and prefects over vast distances, all guarded and recorded and counted, each man and woman working for us, in this room, whether they ever set foot in Rome or not! It is a wonder of the world, all that we have made. Too great for a single life, even that of the Divine Augustus. It is the work of generations . . . and it is for that reason I address you today.'

He paused, letting his breath catch up with the tempo of his words. He'd almost made himself light-headed and he knew a pause would make them sit up. Gaius nodded to Senator Silanus. The man was in the front row and looked nervous. His daughter was ready to give birth any day, after all. Gaius had grown to like the man, discovering him to be a sensible sort, with not too many strong opinions. Unless he kept them to himself, which worked just as well.

'The city is growing,' Gaius went on. 'In the height of its buildings, in the sheer number of people all wanting to take rooms here. You have all benefited from the results, I think! Those houses with gardens you bought for next to nothing a generation back are worth two or three times as much now, are they not? There is wealth enough in this single hall to fund the empire for a decade, I think. We have the gold and talent to make rivers pour through Rome, but the city is dry. The people gasp like crows, bringing empty buckets to the street fountains or staggering back from the Tiber with water for their families. You have all seen it. This city needs water. Water is life!'

He tapped his fingernail on the lectern.

‘You will vote on this, as is our custom . . . but I do not think you will oppose my will. Tiberius was an old man and perhaps he was satisfied with the city he inherited. I am neither old nor satisfied. I will have my way in this. I intend to bring three new aqueducts into the city – a thousand miles of arches, carrying water right to the heart of Rome. They will mean new fountains and public baths, as many as Augustus built and more. They will bring clear, cold water to the people in the middle of summer. The potteries will expand again, the leatherworkers will get a share, the smiths will quench their furnaces! The brackish stuff they all get now will be made clean and good.’

‘Where is the tally of costs?’ someone called. Others murmured in support, though it was with closed mouths or lowered heads, so Gaius could not see who lent their voice.

‘The imperial treasury can support a programme of building – it must, if we are to become the city we should always have been. Those millions of bricks will be made in our own potteries and kilns, gentlemen. The wages we pay the workers will be spent in this city. It will come flowing back in return for all their sweat. And more! And more! A new great sewer will be needed, joining half a dozen lesser ones, taking all the night soil away from the city. You’ve all smelled the, er . . . the heat of summer, gentlemen. It is not a gentle thing, that reek. Well, we have strong backs and iron spades . . . and tiles and pipes of lead. We will employ men to dig a great tunnel – and again, they will spend their pay on whores and wine where they sleep! I will do wonders, gentlemen. And more! I will . . .’

He broke off. To his surprise, a senator had risen to his feet, waiting to be heard. Gaius knew him by reputation.

Proculus was one of the consuls who had annulled the will of Tiberius. That association may have been the reason he had confidence enough to stand. With slight impatience, Gaius gestured to him.

‘Do you have a point to add, Consul Proculus? I have not yet finished.’

The man had the grace to flush, perhaps with a dawning sense of having made an error. He stammered as he answered.

‘Your Imperial M-Majesty, I merely wished to ask the route of the aqueducts you propose. I agree they are needed. Your plan is a master stroke, I am certain. I only consider the slum districts along the eastern sections of the walls. I saw some men out there this morning, marking a route with string and lead weights. Yet there is no room for an aqueduct to come in past the walls there. Those streets are little more than alleys and a maze.’

Gaius’ unblinking gaze pierced his nervousness. The consul sat down as if his own strings had been cut.

‘Water, water, water . . .’ Gaius said softly. The senators in the front rows leaned in and he smiled mirthlessly. ‘It is the very stuff of life, so if I must, I will raze those districts. I will tear a path right through them for the water we must have.’ He waved a hand as another senator rose slowly to his feet. ‘Yes, I imagine they will howl and complain. Perhaps we can lend them funds against their income to build new homes, or . . . some other solution. Let them hate me, so long as they fear me! When they see the new baths we have built, or when they find work in a dozen places that did not exist before, they will bless my name then. Or not, as some men are eaten up by hate. I will be father to them even so. I will be master to them, teacher and shepherd.’

Though you know . . .’ he paused to chuckle, ‘if a sheep runs away, it is the loving shepherd who breaks one of its legs. It is the shepherd who takes their wool, and cuts their throats.’

There seemed to be a sea of wide eyes as they returned his cold gaze. Another who had risen changed his mind and sat down slowly. Gaius would have gone on, but he heard running steps approaching the senate house. There were only a few things important enough to interrupt a full meeting in that place. He exchanged a quick glance with Silanus.

The man who entered was the prefect of the praetorians, Naevius Macro. Caligula saw him and swallowed. It was war then, or some threat to the imperial family. As the man hesitated at the door, Gaius gestured impatiently for him to approach. He bent down to hear Macro’s whisper, keeping his expression utterly calm. The senate would be watching for the mood to take, of course. He truly was shepherd to them in that moment.

‘I see,’ Gaius said. He prided himself on his control. He was no Stoic, but he had learned on Capreae how to make his face a mask.

‘My noble senators, gentlemen . . . I am called away. It seems you must have your talk and your vote in my absence. I will send for the results tomorrow.’ He saw that was not enough as they shifted and glanced at one another. ‘My wife Claudilla . . . is in labour. Senator Silanus? Do you wish to accompany me?’

Despite himself, Gaius felt a smile creeping across his face, quite beyond his control. It was echoed in hundreds of the men facing him, seeing a joy they had known themselves. It was something they could understand, and a cheer began, surprising him.

His father-in-law rose from his seat with some dignity. Gaius saw two or three more clap Silanus on the back as he passed. They would not attempt that sort of intimacy with the emperor. The idea was oddly disappointing. In normal days, Gaius hated to be touched. Yet for once, he thought he might have welcomed the fellowship of it.

He left his spot on the dais and restrained himself to a dignified walk. Only when he was out in the open air, with the bustle and noise of the forum all around, did he begin to run. He was going to be a father! He saw Macro and half a dozen praetorians fall in beside him, matching his pace. The emperor could not be left to run alone, not where madmen and slaves walked. No, they formed a phalanx around Gaius and his father-in-law, yelling ahead to clear the road, driving through the crowds like a spear-point.

‘Macro!’ Gaius said suddenly. The man was at his elbow in an instant. ‘Send someone for my sisters. For Agrippina and Drusilla.’

The praetorian gave the nod to two of his men. Gaius watched as they peeled off, going faster. Drusilla would be in the house he had bought for her, of course. He wished he had not given way to Agrippina’s will. She should have been there as well! If she missed the birth, he would be furious.

He reached the Palatine and stretched out as the road grew steep. Gaius was twenty-five and slender as a wand. His praetorians matched the pace easily. He sensed a strange mood in them as they ran, a sort of giddiness. It was extraordinary, but he saw they were grinning. This was life! He tried to fix it in his memory as he sometimes did, focusing on sights and smells and sounds all around him.

A bright Roman afternoon, with his child coming into the world.

Gaius reached the outer rooms at a sprint. The nurse on station there was very young and was horribly flustered in his presence, stumbling over her greeting. The emperor took a moment to breathe, composing himself. He was panting, drops of sweat running down his cheek and neck. He could hear shrieking beyond the door, he realised, swallowing hard.

‘Should I go in? Or not?’ he demanded. For once, his authority was a hindrance. It seemed to shock the woman into huge-eyed silence. He lost patience.

As Gaius entered, he saw the birthing room was crowded. Six women stood or sat around a low bed, with red rags draped over their arms. They turned to him as if a wolf had come in, but no one spoke. He frowned, feeling no welcome from them.

Gaius could smell blood and sharp urine. He looked on Claudilla and saw she was flushed, her legs splayed wide. An older woman worked down there, shoving and twisting as Claudilla continued to shriek. It all seemed too violent to be the birth of a child. Gaius went to the safer end and held her hand, pressing it to his cheek. She did not seem to feel it.

‘What’s wrong with her?’ he said.

No one answered and he released his grip to rest a hand on the midwife’s shoulder, forcing her to respond. Even in the midst of a struggle, she knew the touch of an emperor was no small thing. She swallowed and drew back hands mired in blood and oil. The colour was so bright he had to look away.

‘The child is . . . turned, Majesty. Feet first, like a calf.’

Gaius made the mistake of leaning over to peer between his wife’s legs. He could hardly understand what he saw there. Two tiny feet showed, one revealed to a bloody knee. They moved! His mouth opened in horror and he could not drag his gaze away.

‘Well?’ he demanded at last. ‘Calves are born like this every day, aren’t they? Pull it out! Why are you not pulling on those legs?’

‘Majesty . . .’ the woman said. She was very pale, in fear or exhaustion, he didn’t know. ‘There isn’t enough room for the head. If I pull and the head remains trapped, the child will die. A child *has* to come head first – the largest part. Or they will suffocate.’

One of the feet gave a tiny kick, drawing Gaius’ gaze once more. He shuddered at that evidence of life. Claudilla had opened her eyes and seen he was there. She held up her hand to his and he felt helpless, unsure of himself. He was aware of Senator Silanus standing in the doorway, eyes wide. Gaius felt a spasm of irritation. He crossed to the door.

‘Not now, senator,’ he said. ‘I will call if you are needed. Perhaps you could go and see where my sisters are.’ They would know what to do, he thought. Agrippina would know.

‘Gaius,’ his wife called. ‘Is the baby all right?’

He looked at the midwife and she spread her hands helplessly.

‘Can’t you turn the child?’ Gaius snapped. He knew nothing about this! An hour before, he’d had the senate waiting on his every word, but he was utterly lost in that room, with no idea of the rules.

‘Your wife is rather small, Majesty,’ the midwife replied. ‘I have been trying, but even with the oil I can barely get a hand inside.’

Her voice was drained and he saw despair that chilled him. No, he would not let death come into that little place. He could not explain his feeling of confidence, but he was certain. He had come too far, survived too much, to lose all he loved.

‘Do *something!*’ Claudilla shrieked.

She closed her eyes again as every muscle tensed and her grip crushed his fingers with extraordinary strength. To Gaius’ surprise, the midwife stood up and gestured for him to come with her to the other side of the room. She held her hands up to the air and he did not look at them.

‘Majesty, she has not dilated. If I cut her wide enough to free the child’s head, she will almost certainly die. There was bleeding before and it has only just begun to stop. I might still be able to save the child, but I don’t know.’

‘You are offering me the choice?’ Gaius said in astonishment. ‘No! Save them both, or join them.’

‘Majesty, *please*. I can save your wife, but only if I take the child in pieces. You don’t have to stay to see it! In a year, all this will be forgotten. Otherwise, she is exhausted. We will lose her.’

Gaius said nothing. He just breathed and stared, unable to take in what was happening. When a knock sounded, he turned in something like fury, then relief as Drusilla entered. Senator Silanus peered from the corridor outside. Gaius could not help looking past him for Agrippina. His sister’s expression fell as she understood, turning to dread as she realised the mood was not one of joy in that room.

‘They want me to *choose*, Drusilla,’ he said, waving a

hand. His voice broke, a raw sound. His sister had to have it all explained and Gaius was no clearer at the end than before, though he had seen blood drain from her face.

‘I’m so sorry, Gaius. I wish there was a better choice. What will you do?’

Drusilla rubbed his back as he went to his wife. Claudilla had skin like candle wax but she was aware, looking from brother to sister for some clue.

‘Gaius? Why can’t they get it out? Please, I’m so tired. I just want to sleep.’

‘Push the child back in,’ Gaius growled to the midwife. ‘Oil your hand again and put it back. Let me see you do it.’

The woman wanted to speak, but he was the emperor. She clamped her lips to a thin line and dipped her arm to the elbow into a pot of olive oil. The tiny legs kicked hard as she touched them, then fell limp and pliant. Her eyes widened as she pushed and twisted them. The woman began to sob as she tried again and again to return the child to the womb.

Gaius could not have said how much time passed before Agrippina was at his side. He was too wrung out to chide her for it, though her selfishness had cost him her advice when he needed it most. Even Drusilla could not keep all the anger from her voice as she explained.

Agrippina took Claudilla’s hand, seeing how floppy she was, how utterly spent. His sister nodded once.

‘Let the child go, Gaius. You can have another. Give the order.’

He nodded, tears pouring from him.

‘All right. Do it,’ he whispered.

‘He’s dead, Majesty,’ the midwife said, her own voice choking. ‘He won’t feel anything.’

‘He?’ Gaius echoed. ‘It was a boy?’

The woman nodded, her eyes dark with sorrow. She took a little knife from a pouch at her waist and made quick and brutal cuts, removing the child in pieces. Agrippina turned away rather than witness that horror. She saw her brother still looking and tried to turn his head. He slapped her hand away.

‘My son,’ he said.

They all heard the midwife gasp then. Agrippina risked another glimpse and saw a charnel house, with fresh red blood running.

‘We left it too late,’ the midwife said. ‘Something has torn inside.’

At the other end of the bed, Claudilla had been sitting up on her elbows, trying to see, to understand. She slumped suddenly, her head lolling.

‘Save *her!*’ Gaius roared.

They all flinched from the sound, while the midwife pressed cloths to the blood and tried to halt the flow. All the noise and panic in that room drained away, leaving only the sound of weeping. Claudilla had gone, left rumped and stained in tears and sweat, too still for life.

‘I’m sorry,’ the midwife wept. ‘There was nothing I could do. I’m so sorry.’

She took up clean white cloths and was laying them over the bloody mess that made up the lower half of the bed. She looked as if she expected to be killed, and with good reason. Gaius was staring, stunned. Drusilla rubbed his back and both sisters feared what he would do.

‘Get out, all of you,’ he said at last. ‘I want a moment with my wife.’

They left the room in varying forms of relief. The

nurses would have tried to clean the body, but Agrippina ushered them out. Their lives hung on a thread and perhaps her own as well. She had seen rising madness in her brother's eyes and it made her afraid.

Alone in the room, Gaius sat on the bed and smoothed damp hair from Claudilla's face. She was warm to the touch, her cheeks pink, as if she could just open her eyes once more and see the man who loved her.

'I should have saved you,' he said. 'I thought I could save you both . . . and I knew how much you wanted the child. It was a son, Claudilla! Just as you said. Did you know? I can't remember if anyone told you before . . .'

He frowned, lost. He rose quickly and crossed to the door, opening it on a grieving group.

'Senator Silanus?' Gaius said. 'Would you come in, please?'

The older man had greyed beneath his tan, Gaius noticed. He stood back as the senator approached the bed. Gaius' gaze snagged on the wicked little knife that had dis-jointed his baby son.

Senator Silanus bent and kissed his daughter for the last time. He froze then, when he felt the touch of that same blade at his throat.

'I want you to carry a message for me,' Gaius said in his ear. 'Tell Claudilla it was a son. And tell her . . . everything that was good in me . . . dies with her.'

I I

Gnaeus Ahenobarbus was drunk. He had not been certain for most of the morning, but he was pretty sure by the time he reached the Campus Martius. He'd begun drinking in the small hours the night before – on his own, which he knew never led to anything good. He could not actually remember harnessing his quadriga team, nor much of the road from the estate to the great field outside the city. Some men sang when they were drunk. Gnaeus grew sullen, drawn deeper and deeper into his thoughts. Sleep came then, sometimes, or perhaps rage, followed by days of guilt.

He scowled at that thought, waving an amphora as if to show the Campus to an unseen audience. In the days of the Republic, that great field had been more than just a training ground. Games and races were held out there, as well as elections for consuls, feast-day sacrifices . . . He waved the amphora again – and a dozen other things he could not bring to mind. It had been a happier time, a simpler time. Before emperors had allowed the city to creep

beyond the walls, favouring their friends. Little by little, the Campus Martius had lost its open character. They'd taken something beautiful and crushed it under a heel. That had been before his marriage, he thought blearily. He too had been happy before Agrippina.

He shaded his eyes, yanking too hard on the reins, so that his four jerked to a stop.

'Sorry, lads,' he muttered.

One hand wound the reins on an iron peg while he peered over the field. He balanced on a platform barely larger than his sandals, with the amphora jammed between the chariot side and his hip. Another man would surely have dropped it, but he did not. More than skill, *balance* was what had made him a champion.

The great field was not empty that day. Even then, with half the city afraid of his wife's brother, there were still chariot teams out practising. Of course, they had to be perfect for ludi and festival days – over a hundred a year – and so they trained, away from the roaring crowds. Gnaeus smiled at the sight of dust rising in tails behind them. He missed the life. He had been one of them once! He was drawn back sometimes; not too often, just when sadness overwhelmed him. On days such as this, he found he could drink until his senses drowned – and occasionally he would find himself out there again, looking on his youth, when everything had been all right.

Gnaeus tossed the last amphora high, enjoying the sound as it shattered. His horses snorted in reply. By the gods, it was still a glorious place, with a breeze blowing and the smell of dust and iron on the air. He breathed in and had to catch himself before he fell out of the chariot.

‘Whoa there,’ he said to his horses. ‘Whoa.’

They had not moved. The world had lurched around him. Still, they would not run, even if he went sprawling. That was the first thing a charioteer taught a new team, to halt at his word. Gnaeus had seen too many young lads racing after an empty chariot, their team galloping to the horizon. Horses were idiots, though he loved them.

Taking up the reins, Gnaeus snapped them lightly, moving his team to a trot. The four horses were not lathered with sweat. He had clearly taken it easy on the road, while he swigged and glowered and shouted curses. That amphora had not been the second, he recalled. Or the third. He had thrown one at some passing farmer – a fourth? There had definitely been a pause to vomit.

Gnaeus belched into a fist as he crossed the Campus. If he turned his head just so, he could ignore the city walls on his right hand. The emperor had gone mad in there, spilling blood every day with accusations and threats and horrors to exceed anything Tiberius had done. Gnaeus refused even to look in that direction. Caligula, they called him. Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus. He snorted at that. His wife’s family were all named for dead men.

As he drew closer to the walls, he passed some of the new homes and temples that had been allowed to spring up. Beyond the river, they were laying out the bounds of a new circus – said to be for private races. It would mean more money for the teams, but the idea of risking life and limb for just a few senators or the emperor’s close family . . . Gnaeus blinked as he realised he might be counted in that number. Agrippina certainly would. He had not seen her for weeks, so important had she become.

With difficulty, Gnaeus tried to keep his line of sight

in the middle distance, as if by ignoring all that was new, he could see back to when he was young. The rumble of his chariot had a few heads turning to watch. No doubt they observed the way he held the reins and balanced on that tiny step, still the master and not just some old drunk.

Gnaeus passed a group of eighty legionaries out on a run, tramping along in formation. He knew them by their cropped hair and tattoos. Praetorians. They too had to train to keep their fitness. He recalled they had a barracks on the other side of the city, but that was the point. The Campus was for everyone! What would they all do when the city reached the Tiber and all the open space was filled? Where would they train then?

He saw he had drifted into hailing distance of the chariot teams. He groaned as he saw the colours. Greens – the Prasini. His old team. The Reds were there as well, further along the walls and practising formation drills. Gnaeus drew gently on the reins, slowing his four to a walk but not quite halting them. Words of Virgil drifted into his mind as he watched: ‘Now sinking low, now raised aloft, they seem to be borne through empty air.’ It was true – at full speed, the chariots flew like birds, the greatest speed and joy he had ever known.

Gnaeus had vowed to avoid the new riders. After he’d retired, he’d still been a champion at the Green stables, at least for a while. He’d come back on race days and he had always been willing to advise on tactics or breeding lines. One by one, his old friends had all retired. Younger faces appeared, fresh and unlined, riders with no idea who he was. Gnaeus had seen something like pity or embarrassment in their eyes as he kept hanging around. In the end,

one of them had snapped at him to go back to his seat. Wounded pride made him stay away after that.

He did not recognise the Green riders. They were running two-man quad chariots, training men and horses until they could react almost without words. He'd *seen* that, he recalled. Gnaeus had been screeching into a crash once, reins loose, utterly helpless. His horses had wrenched into the exact jink and turn he wanted – and hadn't had time to roar aloud. They may have been stupid beasts, but they had saved him that day.

One of the Green pairs dismounted to check some piece of kit or set-up. The sight made Gnaeus ache with longing for all the conversations he'd known. His knees and lower back may have gone, but the expertise, the experience still remained. The teams chose favourite wood- and metal-workers, shaved the weight down, everything. Winning was an art and he knew he would always miss that brotherhood of equals and competitors.

A young woman came close to the pair. She was not unaccompanied, Gnaeus noted. She wore the stola robe of a respectable family and either her brother or her husband was trying to usher her past the teams. Perhaps she had left the city to walk to the tomb of Augustus, or buy fruit, or even just to see the charioteers. They all had their followers, as Gnaeus remembered very well. He frowned when one of the Green riders took the woman's arm, holding her. The fellow was laughing, but it was not gentle. Whatever he said made the woman try to pull away. Gnaeus moved his horses closer. The Greens had been his team. He didn't plan to interfere, but he edged in even so.

The woman's companion was no coward. He tried to strike the charioteer's arm and break his grip. The astonished

response was a punch that rocked his head to one side, knocking him cold on the dusty ground. The woman shrieked. Gnaeus growled when he saw the young Green jerk her into his arms, pressing himself against her. There was no one to prevent it then. What crowd there was moved quickly away from the little scene, preferring not to see. Nor were there vigiles close by, so far out on the Campus.

Gnaeus looked over his shoulder to see if the training praetorians were anywhere in range. They had vanished in a plume of dust and he cursed under his breath. The woman's robe had been torn open by then. She'd managed to claw the young man's face and he was furious, spitting angry words and trying to hit her as she protected her head, desperate to get away.

Gnaeus groaned. There were four Green charioteers, all fit and young. He knew very well what could happen. Still, he could not just watch. He drew up by the struggling pair and spoke from the plate.

'Put her down, son. You're making a fool of yourself.'

The reply was a string of angry curses. Gnaeus smiled and cracked his knuckles, then stepped down. The earth was not completely steady underfoot, he discovered. He heard the man's partner give a shout, no doubt summoning the second team.

'I said put her down. Used to be, the Greens were a team with honour. Let her go.'

'Who are you, you old soak? Steal that chariot, did you? Take it back to its owner before I put you across my knee.'

Gnaeus stepped in close. He took a swing, but the younger man ducked it. He did let go of the woman, pushing her hard enough to knock her down. Gnaeus saw what was coming and dipped his head into a storm of blows.

He had the sense of the second chariot skidding to a halt, the sort of flashy move he'd loved in his own youth. He could barely see, there was so much dust. Blows thumped into him and he could feel all of them. Charioteers were strong. The young woman was screaming and one of the other Greens had grabbed her up.

'I've got this,' the attacker's partner said. 'Stand clear. I'm going to cut the bastard.'

He was delighted with himself, Gnaeus could see. As the first one ducked away, the second drew a knife. His friends laughed and cheered him on.

That came to an end when Gnaeus drew his own knife and shoved it up under the young man's ribs. He worked the blade back and forth, breathing wine into the charioteer's face.

Something struck him then. Light flashed and sound vanished. Gnaeus found himself rolling in the dust. Young men! They had no sense of a fair fight any more. He scrambled up and swung wildly at a figure racing at him, barely glimpsed. For once, he connected with a crunch. His hand throbbed, but he'd broken knuckles before. Another of them was face down, completely still.

Gnaeus rose to his feet, grinning through dust and blood.

'Get away!' the first one called. He'd started it, but it seemed his nerve had gone. Gnaeus looked at him in disbelief as the young man backed off, step by step.

'Listen . . .' Gnaeus began.

The man grabbed the woman again. Perhaps he had some idea of a hostage or a bargaining piece as he dragged her towards his chariot. His horses were snorting and pawing the earth, sensing rage and fear on the air.

‘Just let her go!’ Gnaeus shouted, suddenly furious with him. He saw the fourth member of their group had chosen to run, vanishing across the Campus Martius towards the city, as if to fetch help. Some of the wine had burned off in all the exertion, and Gnaeus wanted to be sick. He watched in disbelief as the one who’d attacked him dragged the young woman into his chariot and untied the reins with his free hand.

‘You’ll answer for this!’ the young man snarled back at him. ‘The Greens have lawyers, money . . . You’ll hang for what you did here.’

Gnaeus vomited. He had been hit in the gut and it all had to come out. He almost went down on one knee as the raving charioteer snapped his reins and drove his team to a run.

The woman’s stunned companion was coming round, Gnaeus saw. That young man was scrambling up, understanding too late what was happening. There was one body, another still out cold – and a third . . . yes, still running for his life. It could have gone worse, he thought ruefully.

The woman’s friend came running over, making Gnaeus open one bloodshot eye to look at him.

‘Please. They’ve taken my sister.’

‘There’s a chariot right there,’ Gnaeus said, waving a hand at his own team. ‘Go after them.’

‘I can’t handle one of those things! Can you? Please, before they hurt her.’

Gnaeus stood, feeling his bruises protest. He heard the woman shrieking in the distance and sighed.

‘I believe I can,’ he said.

He climbed up on the plate and took up the reins. When

he snapped them, his team took off across the dusty field, free at last, building speed until the wind howled.

Gnaeus cursed himself as he felt his back begin to ache, a pain as sharp as memory. He needed wine! His mouth was leather. He should *not* have interfered. It was not his concern what a few wild charioteers got up to! He had been those charioteers once! He knew there was something noble about trying to save the young woman, but he wasn't at all sure it was worth the trouble he had earned. The Greens really did have wealth – and influence, he thought bitterly. They could cause trouble for him. No, they *would* cause trouble. Though seeing their expressions change when he'd stuck a knife in one had been satisfying. Even old dogs could bite. He grinned into the swirling dust, narrowing his eyes, choosing the best path. That was something the old trainers used to teach. It wasn't just the lightest chariot or the best mounts that won the race. There were seven laps, with fourteen ends to negotiate at high speed. A master looked ahead – and saw the way through.

The distance closed, the chariot in front growing before his eyes. Gnaeus could see the young Green looking back over his shoulder. He imagined the man's shock growing. Young horses, master charioteer, yet somehow the bastard was being reeled in, length by length. He'd tell himself it was the weight of the woman, but it wasn't.

Gnaeus made sure to show his teeth, though he could taste grit. He wanted the whoreson terrified out of his wits. If he got control of his panic and just stopped, he'd probably make short work of one drunken pursuer. Even so, it felt good to be racing again. With a start, Gnaeus realised that was exactly what he was doing. The pain in his back seemed to vanish. He leaned in, relishing it.

Little by little, he drew closer, until his horses were snorting in the dust of the chariot ahead. Gnaeus squinted as he tried to work out how to actually bring the chase to a halt. His team were between eight and twelve years old. They could not keep that pace for long and he had a vision of being forced to slow down, just one more failure in a long, long list.

Ahead, the Green charioteer gave a great heave, flinging the woman over the back of the chariot. Gnaeus had been expecting that. Weight did matter, and it was what he would have done. She shrieked, the sound choked off as she hit the ground. Gnaeus had already swung wide and his team didn't trample her. His reactions had been good enough to save her life, he thought with satisfaction. For what seemed like a beat of time, he was out alongside the one he raced, almost level. Then, slowly, the other chariot began to draw ahead. The younger man grinned and whooped, sensing victory.

Gnaeus could have let him go, but he had been a champion and he did not lose. He heaved on his reins, swinging his team right into the other one. Two sets of wheels struck and suddenly jammed. The sky spun and the chariots exploded into whirring pieces of wood and metal. Horses went down and Gnaeus saw the sun flash and go black.

The woman loomed over him, deliberately blocking the sun. He blinked up at her, trying to understand what had happened and why he was lying on the field, with city walls in the distance. Gnaeus could see praetorians moving and pointing on the watchtowers there.

'Don't try to get up,' she said. 'You saved me. Thank you.'

She was crying, he thought. He squinted then as she moved her head and the sun pierced him. He groaned.

‘Where is the other one? The Green?’

‘He’s dead. He went under a wheel, I think, or a horse. I’ve never seen anything like . . . Two of the horses have broken legs. They’re up, but the hooves are hanging loose and they won’t put weight on them.’

Gnaeus cursed himself. Agri would kill him! What had he even done it for? To rescue a woman he’d never met? To show he was still young enough to race or fight? It was all so pitiful. He could see his wife’s face, hear her scorn. ‘Why did you do it, Barbo? Don’t you know the damage you’ve done . . .’ He wanted to weep, but he could not, not while the woman looked on him. As he blinked back tears, he saw she was pretty beaten up herself. Her face was scraped raw all along one side and she held one wrist in the other.

‘Broken?’ he said.

She was still weeping, but he supposed it was the shock of violence. He’d seen men trembling hard enough to rattle armour, hours after a battle or a race. Some just couldn’t sleep. It took them all differently.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she said. ‘Why did you do it, though? You don’t know me or my brother. Why did you risk everything to save me?’

He almost made a joke then, some quick comment to move past the terrible intensity of her gaze. The urge seeped away, leaving him cold and empty.

‘I didn’t do it for you,’ he said at last. ‘I did it for her.’ He tried to chuckle, but it hurt.

Why was she sobbing? The danger was past. Gnaeus tried to struggle up. The pain was appalling and he gasped

as he locked his arms straight. He stared at a broken piece of chariot driven into his stomach, just under the ribs. It looked as if it should have been more painful than it was. Perhaps the wine in his blood was helping. He felt thirst return, worse than he'd ever known.

'Ah,' he said. 'Now that . . . isn't good.'

His breathing was getting harder, he realised. Damn. He wasn't afraid of pain, but choking was not a pleasant prospect. He saw the woman looking into the distance, shading her eyes.

'Anyone else coming?' Gnaeus asked. She shook her head. 'Just us, then.'

He looked again at the piece of painted wood sticking out of him. He knew what it meant.

'I wonder if you'd tell my wife . . . that she wasn't with me, when I needed her. No, don't say that.' He breathed out. 'I love her, you see, but I haven't told her, not really. Or at least I haven't made her understand how much . . .'

He paused. It was as if the pain had caught up with him. Someone had lit a fire in his gut. He didn't dare look down again.

'What's her name?', she said. 'I'll tell her, I swear.'

Gnaeus watched as the young woman knelt by him, cradling his head as best she could with one good arm. He could smell lavender. It was grown in Gaul, in endless fields of purple. The farmers burned it for hours and pressed it, vast amounts just to get a single cupful of clear oil. For him, it was the smell of summer campaigns. He breathed it in.

'Her name?' he said with a start. Had he drifted off? 'Agrippina Ahenobarbus. Tell her I am sorry I wasn't a better husband. That she wasn't a better wife.'

‘You don’t mean that,’ she said. ‘Just rest. I’ll tell her. I’m sure you were a good husband. You are a good man.’

He didn’t seem to hear.

‘Oh, tell her I loved her, would you? She won’t believe you, but someone should probably say it. And tell her to teach our son to ride and use a sword.’

He grimaced as the pain increased again. He could *see* Agrippina’s reaction! Nothing touched her. He’d married a woman who didn’t love him, had never loved him. Gnaeus began to choke, overwhelmed with a sense of ending.

‘Hold on,’ she said. ‘Please. My brother will come. He knows wounds. He’ll patch you up.’

‘All right,’ he said. ‘I’ll hold on.’

She rocked him for an age before her brother finally reached them, panting and red-faced. His sister was crying then.

‘He’s gone,’ she said in a wail, looking up at him. ‘He was so brave. He didn’t have to save me, but he took them all on. He was a good man.’

Her brother eased the weight from her, wincing at the terrible wound. He had pleaded with this man to go after his sister and guilt ate at him.

‘Thank you,’ he said, though he couldn’t be heard. He laid Gnaeus gently down and closed his staring eyes.

I 2

Agrippina watched as her son pulled himself up on an iron chair, walking unsteadily across the room. His balance was very good, she thought. His father's boy. She clapped her hands and congratulated Lucius, seeing him beam toothlessly in reply. She could hardly believe the way that smile warmed her. It was like the sun coming out after a long winter. She had never known anything quite like it before. Not with her parents or brothers, or not that she remembered. Not with Gnaeus.

Her thoughts snagged on the last. It was strange. She'd thought of him as Barbo so many times when he was alive, when he always seemed to be accompanied by a storm of noise and destruction. In death, those memories had begun to fade, leaving a kind of peace. He was Gnaeus again. She'd lost track of the times she'd turned to say something to him, only to remember he was gone. She would never see him laugh or hear him erupt as something drove him beyond endurance. The house was very quiet without him. Even with their son toddling around, putting

everything in his mouth to see how it tasted and yelling if it was taken away. Yet little Lucius was a spring day compared to her husband. Gnaeus had been the tempest, and part of her found she missed it, or him. It was hard to be sure which it was exactly.

The child left the room on his own two feet, wandering off in excitement at this new view of the world. Lucius had managed his first steps only a few weeks before, around the time of Gnaeus' funeral. Agrippina frowned in memory. First Tiberius, then her mother and brothers' interment, then her husband. She had seen enough of those sombre days to last a lifetime! At least that last had been a quiet affair, with his body put into the family tomb. The Greens had sent a wreath, which Agrippina had torn apart and returned to them. They'd tried to bring a case in law at first, before they knew who he had been – and more importantly, who Agrippina's brother still was. Those angry men had gone very quiet and pale then, when they'd heard. It was a miracle, really. All their complaints had just melted away.

Agrippina could hear thumping from the outer gate. One of the slaves would go, of course. She was still in mourning, dressed in dark clothes with hair unbound, her skin clear of paint and artifice. She was not expected to entertain visitors. That too was a blessing and she found herself murmuring thanks to Gnaeus, as if he was still close and might hear. She missed him, more than she would ever have guessed. Perhaps it was that there was so much unsaid between them, or just that he had protected her. His sense of duty had always put her life before his. Without him, there was no one to save her from her brother.

Gaius had changed on the death of Claudilla and their son. Agrippina shuddered to think of him. If her thoughts

drifted to Rome, she pulled them back. It was as if she contemplated a sleek-bodied spider, waiting for it to dart into movement. She scratched the skin of her arm at the thought, irritated with herself. It was still Gaius! Still the sweet Caligula she had known.

She shook her head as the thumping sounded again. Was the whole house asleep? She could not go to the outer door, not as she was. Someone else would have to do it. If Gnaeus had been there, he would have had the staff jumping . . . He was not there.

Being made to spend a month away from the emperor's side, from his personal rooms at night, had been welcome. Even Gaius had understood a widow had to grieve. There had been gifts and fruit delivered to the estate every day, until it almost felt like an act of aggression, each basket a reminder that he was still there, still waiting for her to return. All while he saw conspirators in every corner, while good men were put to torture until they would admit to anything just to make it all stop. Gaius was quite mad, she was certain, as dangerous as any scorpion and about as restrained. She'd thought . . . It hurt even to think of it. She'd thought Claudilla might heal some of the pain and rage, that she might be a balm to him. Or that his son would make the emperor want to be a better man. There was nothing like having a child for making a young father look ahead, instead of always back to his past.

All that had been torn away in a single day, a single hour. She was not yet sure if Gaius had been wrenched onto a new and bloody furrow, or back onto his original path. His young wife and son were a glimpse of what might have been. Perhaps what she saw now, what all Rome saw, was all Gaius was, all he could be. It was not a pleasant thought.

She felt a spike of irritation as footsteps sounded.

‘I am *in mourning* still,’ Agrippina called loudly. ‘Whoever it was will wait another day.’

‘Domina, I could not stop him,’ came a voice she knew.

Agrippina looked up in shock. The member of staff was cringing, but the man at his side stood calmly, a block.

‘I must offer my apologies, my lady. I am sorry to intrude in such a way.’

‘Centurion Italus,’ Agrippina said. She felt her stomach lurch at what his presence had to mean. To her confusion, he blushed and nodded.

‘I would not have come without explicit orders from the emperor, my lady. His Imperial Majesty orders your return. The period of grieving is at an end and he requires you to wait on him.’

‘Leave us,’ Agrippina said to the house slave. ‘Find my son and make sure he eats a little stewed apple.’

The man vanished, happy to leave the presence of a praetorian in armour. Italus had removed his helmet and held it under one arm. Agrippina saw again the unusual coppery red of his hair. She wanted to touch it, she realised, surprised at her own reaction. Perhaps it was because he had been kind to her on her first trip into the imperial precinct. Or that he had been there too on the island of Pontia. She shuddered at that memory. His expression shifted too, as if he followed the same line of thought.

‘We always seem to meet in hard times, my lady. Or when hard things need to be done. I was sorry to hear of your husband’s death. He was a fine man. I wagered on many of his races, as I think I told you.’

Agrippina’s thoughts whirled as he spoke. If her brother had called her back, she could be in real danger. She’d seen

terror stealing through Rome like a summer plague. Senators and equites were not safe from sudden accusations. Gaius took their wives to his bed and they dared not complain. They vanished into his cells if they did. Even Drusilla wore a hunted expression then, pinched tight around the mouth. Gaius had lost all restraint and the truth was, he frightened her.

Being without a husband, without Gnaeus' great crashing sense of duty and honour, was . . . harder than Agrippina had expected. She had a sudden memory of her mother, beaten and abused, one eye ruined as praetorians took her into exile.

Agrippina looked on the centurion in the light of that bloody time, moving closer to him. She had learned a few things about men in her years of marriage. She always knew when one of them found her attractive, for example. Something changed in their eyes when they looked on her and they could not hide it. Perhaps this one could be encouraged, properly bound to her side. Only the gods knew the future, but there might come a time when she needed a man to draw a sword in her defence. With Gnaeus gone, Agrippina had only her wits, after all. Well, she could play if she had to.

'I am glad it was you . . . who came,' she said. 'Did you volunteer? For the duty?'

The colour in his cheeks deepened under his tan, she noticed. Good.

'I did, my lady. I remembered you were kind to your uncle, before. That is not . . .'

He caught himself. It was the terrible new tension that had crept into Rome, where every man and woman tried to weigh their words before they were spoken. Agrippina

reached out and touched his bare arm. The contact seemed to jar words loose.

‘That is not always the case at the moment, my lady. Your Uncle Claudius is mocked and . . . humiliated.’

He clamped his mouth shut and Agrippina knew her brother would be the source of the man’s discomfort. Gaius had always had a streak of cruelty in him. She still remembered how he had tortured his blue pup, making the little thing dance though it cried and cried. Hurting her uncle Claudius was like that, she thought. There was no malice in the man, but Gaius would hurt him anyway.

‘I’ll do what I can, Italus, I promise. Though you know I don’t always have influence with my brother. Not when he is angry.’

‘I’m not asking for anything, my lady, I swear. My place is just to escort you to the emperor’s presence. You bring him peace, my lady. We all . . . the city needs to be at peace.’

The red-haired praetorian was clearly struggling not to be disloyal. Agrippina almost rolled her eyes. She had learned to speak as if Gaius stood listening at her shoulder, giving nothing away. She’d thought a praetorian would be at least as careful.

‘I’ll have my carriage prepared. My son loves the horses, you know. He takes after his father in that. I think . . .’

To her astonishment, Italus dared to interrupt.

‘Your son isn’t mentioned in my orders, my lady.’

‘What of it? I would bring him with me even so.’

She saw again the terrible tension rising in the man as he sought words that would not cost him his job or his life.

‘I would . . . not, my lady. If he were mine. Rome can be rather . . . dangerous at the moment.’

He didn’t need to say the child would be guarded by

praetorians. It clearly wasn't the threat of the mob or some violence of the streets that concerned him. Agrippina felt coldness steal across her. The only threat that could unman a praetorian officer had to come from the emperor himself. By the gods, how bad had it become? She swallowed, standing very straight. She had learned how to keep dignity while the storm broke around her. Gnaeus had taught her that.

'Very well, Italus,' she said, her voice low and intimate. 'Thank you.'

Once again, she reached out and drifted her fingertips across his arm. It was a gesture of complete innocence, but he clearly felt it like a branding iron. She could see that in his eyes.

'I'll leave Lucius with his nurse until I return. Can you wait an hour for me to change? If my brother says my widow's grief is at an end, I don't want to rebuke him by coming in colours of mourning.'

'Of course, my lady.'

The praetorian seemed to wince at the very thought, she noticed. She swallowed again. Legions in Germania had filled pits with rats and thrown scrappy little dogs into them, wagering how many the dog would kill in a given time. She considered being delivered into the city, to her brother's personal rooms. A knot of fear clenched her womb. Was she the dog or the rats? They were all afraid, surrounded by baying soldiers with no way to escape.

Agrippina walked up steps on the Palatine, the hem of her stola gliding across polished stone. The city was very clean, she noticed. An army of slaves and perhaps the threat of her brother's disapproval had made it so. The streets had

been brushed, with even the blood and offal of butchered animals scrubbed and sluiced away. Agrippina could smell vinegar on the air, rather than the usual summer reek. Having baths and sewers, even wooden vats for urine on street corners, made Rome unique in the world. Agrippina had seen new wonders from the moment she reached the city walls and found them pierced, broken down by the Appian gate to allow a vast structure to enter the city. It was still bricks in a thousand places, stretching to the distance. Yet the workers were already busy with mortar and kilns, ropes and forges. The scale of the latest aqueduct was beyond anything Agrippina could imagine – and her brother was responsible. She had praised it to Italus and seen his expression lighten for the first time. Good: building work was a safe subject.

When she had been young, Agrippina had dug a toe into an ant nest, revealing thousands of white eggs, with their keepers driven to frenzy. She had watched in fascination as the little creatures sought to get them out of the light, digging with extraordinary speed until they were all hidden once more. The imperial precinct of Rome brought that same sense back as Italus took her to the emperor. Scribes ran in every corridor or scratched vellum in every room she passed. Senators bustled by with their staffs struggling to keep up, buffeted by others on a thousand different tasks. Praetorians glowered in alcoves and junctions, keeping perfect order as they changed watch. All life was there in the mad whirl. Agrippina even saw a group of tailors trotting with bolts of cloth on their shoulders, snapping commands to their apprentices!

She remembered the Palatine as a sleepy place, at least when Tiberius had still been alive. This, though? It had the

energy of that nest she had dug up, a new reign made real around her. She was not sure if she found it exciting or frightening. With a pang, she thought Gnaeus would have loved to see it. Above all, he was proud of his city. To see it invigorated would have pleased him.

Centurion Italus exchanged nods and salutes with the soldiers they passed, while expecting anyone else to get out of his way, at least below the rank of senator. With the pace he set, Agrippina found she was panting as they approached the emperor's private rooms. The frantic entry came to a sudden halt there. Italus announced her and then . . . there was nothing more. The emperor would come when he was ready, that day or the next. Agrippina wondered how long Gaius would make her wait.

As a praetorian, Italus seemed content to stand to one side, feet slightly apart, his hands clasped behind his back. Agrippina felt an ache begin in her shoulders just looking at him. There was nowhere to sit, but the man was already like a stone, as if time meant nothing.

'I don't mind waiting alone, centurion,' she said.

Italus blinked, glancing at the two guards of his own regiment, listening to every word.

'My orders were to deliver you to the imperial rooms, my lady. It wouldn't be right to leave you out here. As I see it.'

'That is kind . . .' she began. The doors opened and she found herself staring into a room where her brother was sitting at a desk.

'Will you wait?' Agrippina murmured. She felt the centurion's gaze on her, though she was already heading into the room.

'I will,' she heard him say, as the doors closed behind. All for a touch on his arm.

Gaius Julius Caesar rose from his desk as his sister entered. Agrippina understood that the room was some sort of formal place, with soldiers along the wall. Perhaps the emperor was never alone, she did not know. There were couches and plants, so that the room had a smell of green things, of life. It was pleasant and she breathed more easily.

‘Let me look at you,’ the emperor said.

She approached him and took the hands he held out, though it meant she could not control the distance between them.

‘Your grieving month is over, Agrippina. Though from what I hear, you would not have needed quite as long as that. Still, Gnaeus was a brave man. A little crude and a little too fond of his wine, but what of that? I never thought he was right for you, Agri. You are too . . . what word shall I use for my beloved sister? Too clever? Too . . . ruthless? I am surprised he lasted as long as he did, in all honesty. I suppose you needed him to give you a child. How is Lucius?’

The words came in a rush, like little thorns to prickle and worry her. She tried to take back her hands, but he held her tightly, his knuckles pale. Agrippina swallowed nervously, seeing something frightening in the dark eyes that pinned her and didn’t seem to blink.

‘H-he is very well, brother. My son. I only wish I could have given him a brother or a sister.’

‘Really? Filling that womb of yours over and over would have felt like a provocation, don’t you think? After my Claudilla, after seeing my son’s limbs cut free, his neck wrapped in that ugly blue cord? Your sister Drusilla remains barren, which is more fitting. Her womb is as

empty as her head, poor thing. But not you, Agri! No, you have your son and heir – and heir to Rome this day. If I broke my neck, you would be a mother to an emperor before the sun went down. Do you ever think of that?’

She began to answer but he spoke over her, forcing her to stop.

‘Of course you do. You are our mother’s daughter, Agrippina, named for her! Of course you think of it. Who wouldn’t spend an hour dreaming? Our mother was granddaughter to Augustus. He descended from the great Julius, who never lost a battle. That is your line, as much as mine . . . though of course your line has a son.’

‘Gaius, you will marry again. Choose a young woman from a fertile family and put a child in her. It is the only way to bring yourself peace in this. I grieve with you for the nephew I will never know, for Claudilla. My heart broke that day. But you are young and strong, brother. You’ll have a dozen children. My son will never inherit.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘No, he will not. I will make sure of that, Agrippina.’

He let her go then, so that her hands fell without him to hold them up. The emperor gestured and a slave glided in to fill a cup with water and wine. Agrippina could only stare as he regarded his sister over the lip.

‘I don’t understand,’ she said after a time. ‘I have been away from Rome for a month, Gaius. I did grieve for Gnaeus, for all his wasted life. You know what a trial he could be, but I think I loved him . . .’

‘That doesn’t matter,’ he said.

She pursed her lips, watching him warily. He was trembling, she noticed, though with what emotion she could not tell. If half the stories she had heard of what went on

in his private rooms were true, perhaps even she was in danger. She realised she should have gone to Drusilla first, to see how the ground lay before just walking in. This was not the brother she knew, not any longer. The dead-eyed young man facing her was something worse. For the first time, she felt a thrill of fear.

‘Do you remember Sejanus, Agrippina?’ he said. ‘I was there when he was strangled and thrown down the Gemonian stairs. The people had gathered, like moths to the lamps we lit. They are such simple creatures! The body slid down the steps and they fell on it, Agrippina! They took their eating knives and they stabbed and stabbed until he was made rags. I wish you had seen it. The man who thought he could steal Rome from Tiberius, who thought he could kill his way to power, throat by throat. Tiberius saw, though! He saw . . . and he moved. Too late to save his son, but perhaps in time. It raised me, after all. More, I have his example. What that old man did rings in my ears, Agrippina, when I look on you.’

‘I am your family, Gaius! I’ve always supported you, loved you!’

‘Have you? Yet your son is heir to the empire and mine is dead. A husband you hated, who beat and raped you is dead . . . and you remain, with all the fortune of the Ahenobarbus family in your hands. No husband for *you*, to say what you can or cannot do! No, I think you have more freedom than the emperor himself.’

‘Gaius, you can’t mean this. I have done nothing to wound you. I’ve given you everything you wanted.’

Agrippina felt her heart thump and miss a beat. Fear choked her, tightening her voice as she struggled to see a way through. He was lost in some fantasy of suspicion and

fear, and she could not head him off. She cursed herself for taking so much time away from Rome. It had cost her the intimacy she had known, the trust. Had Drusilla whispered all this in his ear?

Gaius put the cup down and stood very close, looking into her eyes like a lover.

‘I cannot be sure,’ he said. He reached out and stroked her lips with his thumb. ‘If you were anyone else, I would take you to the steps and watch as you were strangled. An emperor must act, Agrippina, *before* the threat arrives. That is what Tiberius taught me. Even he moved too slowly and so lost his son and our brothers. Yet I was there – and the lesson was not wasted on me.’

‘Please, brother. I am no threat to you. You must know that!’

‘Don’t lie to me, Agrippina,’ he said softly. ‘You are as ruthless as I am. It is what I love about you . . . and why this must be done.’

She saw him nod to someone and felt doors open at her back. Agrippina did not look away. Even then, she sought to hold his gaze on her, to change whatever horror he was about to commit.

‘Don’t do this, Gaius. I love you more than anyone. Please.’

‘On suspicion alone, I will not sentence you to death, Agrippina. I cannot be certain. All I can say is that I know you. I know what you are capable of. So I will confiscate the wealth you inherited from Gnaeus Ahenobarbus. I have already sent auditors to your estate, with my seal.’

‘No!’ she said more loudly. Lucius was there. She felt blood draining from her and she wondered if she would

faint. She had to struggle against a wave of dizziness as she tried to think.

‘What about my son? Your nephew, Gaius! He is an innocent, even if you will not believe it of me. Why would you do this?’

‘I believe I have explained, Agrippina. Without his inheritance, your son . . . well, I assume you have relatives on the Ahenobarbus side. He’ll live with them. Or starve. It isn’t my concern. Perhaps poverty will teach him the value of a coin.’

‘Gaius, what would our mother say? Think of her, please. This is madness.’

‘I don’t think so. I am removing a knife at my throat, before it is drawn. It seems to me to be the wisest course. You have not asked about yourself, sister.’

‘I don’t care what you do with me. As long as I have my son, I’ll live in poverty, I’ll go away from Rome . . . whatever you want.’

He appeared to consider for a time, unless he was just enjoying the fear he saw in her. All Agrippina’s dignity had gone. She wept, for the first time she could remember, in terror of him.

‘No,’ he said at last. ‘You’ll go to exile, but alone. Our mother was sent to Pandateria, but I prefer those cells we saw on Pontia, where Gemellus was kept. Do you remember?’

Agrippina felt something cold grip her. She remembered the eternal darkness of those rooms, cut into stone. She shook her head as if to ward off evil.

‘Please don’t do this,’ she whispered.

The emperor gestured again and she felt strong hands hold her by the arms. A glance confirmed that one of

them was Italus. Had he known? He looked about as pale as she was, so she doubted it. He dared not return her gaze, though his hands were hot on her skin.

‘I do not think we will meet again,’ Gaius said. ‘I may send Drusilla out to you in a few years. Wait for that, Agrippina. Hope is a flame in the dark, I find.’ He smiled, as if he had said something that amused him.

Agrippina tried not to struggle as the two Praetorians began to pull her from the room. She had her mother’s example to terrify her and she knew her fate rested on those men.

The moment the doors closed behind her, she sagged onto the shoulder of Italus.

‘Will your honour protect me?’ she said to him. He glanced at the other. Agrippina thought he was of a lower rank and she was grateful.

‘It will,’ Italus said. ‘I am sorry. I didn’t know . . . I had no idea when I came for you.’

She saw him struggle again and wanted to scream, her thoughts whirling.

Back on the road by the Palatine hill, the other praetorian marched over to a carriage Agrippina had not seen before. It had irons attached to the benches and no roof to shelter occupants from wind or rain. Agrippina tried not to think of her son. Her husband had inherited the wealth of the Ahenobarbus clan. All the uncles and cousins he employed would be beggared at a stroke. Money was power – and her brother had stolen it. She had only the clothes she wore and . . . she realised with a start, a wedding ring and a jewelled bracelet. Behind her back, she managed to bring her hands close and wrench the pieces free. She pressed both into the centurion’s hands. Her eyes beseeched him.

‘Please. For my son.’

‘I’ll try,’ he muttered.

It was all he could say before his companion returned and she was being walked to the carriage and shackled. A crowd was gathering and Agrippina did not dare look up, even as they began to point and jeer. Her mother had been bloodied by the people of Rome. She could feel the desire to scream rising in her like smoke, forcing its way out. No, she had to be calm.

The praetorians took seats on the carriage and snapped the reins, moving on the old nags that drew it. Agrippina could smell sweat and something acrid as they moved through the city, west towards the great port of Ostia.

I 3

The street was close to the eastern wall of the city, not far from the praetorian barracks. It was one of scores in that part of Rome, all fired brick and tile, with a raised kerb running past. The houses were narrow there, three or four storeys tall, with a dozen families crammed into each. It was neither neat nor clean, with piles of refuse sitting above a simple gutter of broken tile. As the praetorians entered, a stillness came to the street. It was early evening and a dozen capons had been brought back from the markets, to be plucked and slaughtered on the steps. Some men worked for pay; those who lived in the poorest parts of Rome would labour for meat. Wild dogs too lurked there, masterless, kicked out of the way by anyone hurrying past. They clustered around the women yanking tufts of feathers, looking to lick their own dinner from whatever was left.

All that came to a halt as news spread. The presence of praetorians could not be good news, not in that place of grime and poverty. The stepping stones between the kerbs

had all been stolen, so that anyone on foot had to step into thick muck. In the summer it dried out, but in winter it could suck a sandal right off a foot. It was said both legion bastards and their whores made homes there, just about in range of shouts from the parade ground.

The praetorians given the task of finding one home in a maze with the sun setting were not in a good mood. The child they had brought to that place had started snivelling as they entered the city. An hour later and the little brat yelled and roared as if they were abducting him. The three men were stone-faced in their dislike of the duty, but duty it was. They would be expected to return to the Palatine offices with a signed chit and the child in his new home. No one wanted to fail at a task, not when consequences could swing down from clear air, bringing death or humiliation on all they knew and loved.

The houses were not numbered or named, of course. In the night, they would block out even the moon and stars, leaving a darkness that would be absolute. The poor knew very well where they lived.

The praetorian officer supposed he could ask for individuals by name. He thought he was in the right road, but even that was dubious. The valleys between the Esquiline, Viminal and Quirinal hills were an absolute nest. He had passed a hundred alleys so tight he would have had to dismount to go down them. There were people living in that gloom, however. He had seen them watching. Even with two praetorians at his back, he'd touched his sword hilt, seeking reassurance. There had been riots before, in Rome. Those streets knew violence amidst the poverty.

The poor lived in the shadows of hills. Of those, the least fortunate rented rooms at the top of narrow tenements,

where water and food had to be carried up flights of stairs each morning and night. They cooked with charcoal under roofs of wood and tile – and they suffered fires every year, with whole streets wiped out and bodies cooked like game birds in the ashes. The praetorian swallowed, feeling his gorge rise. He wanted to do what he had come for and get out. This was not the Rome he knew. These people lived like wild animals, with about the same dignity.

When he rounded a corner, the praetorian saw houses curving into the distance. He swore under his breath. How was a man meant to track down one family in such a place?

‘Dismount and start knocking on doors,’ he ordered his companions. They groaned, of course. That was the advantage of rank, he thought smugly. He could remain above the shit.

He watched as one of his companions handed the child to the other and swung a leg over, leaping down. His boots vanished to the ankle and he swore. Almost in reply, the little boy bawled at extraordinary volume, screeching like an owl with every breath.

The officer winced, quite unable to hear the conversation going on between his man and a nervous-looking tenant. There was some pointing and his soldier nodded, leading the little party further down the road. He stopped a running boy and received another finger jabbing in the same direction.

In the end, it was another hour before they found the place, on another road running parallel. The twilight was fading to black and the officer wondered how they would ever find their way out. If the little boy hadn’t been the emperor’s own nephew, if there hadn’t been the need to

return an inscribed chit to the bureaucrats on the Palatine, he might just have left him on the street to be snatched up. The emperor clearly didn't care what happened. Yet the boy was who he was. The only protection in those bloody days was to do exactly as they were told, no more and certainly no less.

The door his man hammered on was opened by an older woman, around fifty or so and heavy-framed. A lamp lit her features and a small fire burned in an iron bowl, warming the house. She looked strong enough with her sleeves rolled up and her face flushed. She frowned out at them, her eyes falling on the child.

'Are you Domitia Lepida?' he asked.

She nodded, her mouth creased in sourness.

'I thought we'd never find you,' he said.

'Well, it's new to me too, dear. This *was* the home of my houseman, until your emperor took my family's wealth, blessed be his name.'

The praetorian looked wryly at her. It was dangerous to risk even a hint of sarcasm, he thought. He imagined the change in her family's status had come as something of a shock, but there were worse fates than being reduced to poverty. He'd seen a few of them.

A voice called from further inside and she looked back over her shoulder.

'Not now, Remi. It's praetorians. They've brought Barbo's boy.'

'Can you seal your name?' the praetorian said. 'I have to return with proof I handed him over to you.'

The woman scowled, either at him or perhaps at the child who suddenly stopped screeching to stare at her, turning his head back and forth.

‘I don’t know where a seal . . .’ She broke off and shouted into the gloom behind her. ‘Remi! Where is the ring for sealing documents? Bring it to me.’

‘Would you like to come in?’ she added.

The house would hardly fit men in armour, even if he felt he could leave the horses. The centurion shook his head.

‘Duty prevents, love. You can take the child now, if you like. I’ll wait for the seal, or I can write your name for you.’

He said the last proudly, as an educated man. The woman looked over her shoulder once more, clearly losing patience with whoever ‘Remi’ was.

‘Very well. Put “Domitia Lepida”. I’ll make a cross beside . . .’

Another face appeared, making the praetorian frown. Though male, it was painted like a woman, with bright red lips and some kohl around the eyes. The hair too was worn long and held in glittering clasps.

The woman looked from her companion to the praetorians and back.

‘Remi rents a room here. Please don’t mind him. He is an actor.’ She seemed to see the man through their eyes and shrugged. ‘You know what they’re like.’

‘A dancer,’ Remi said in reproof. ‘I do act, yes, in season. I am mainly a dancer.’

‘I see,’ the praetorian said. He looked more than a little uncomfortable in the presence of a painted man.

Domitia Lepida rolled her eyes.

‘Do you have the parchment or not, centurion? I’ll take the child. It’s not like I have any choice.’

‘There is always a choice,’ the praetorian said, reaching under his breastplate. ‘It just looks like there isn’t. Believe

me, I've seen people do worse than leave a child on the street.'

He handed over a sheet of papyrus, cut into a perfect square and marked with the name of the boy: Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus. It took an age for the woman and her companion to locate a stylus and then to grind and wet a little ink. The woman watched as the praetorian formed letter by letter. He was perspiring by the time it was finished, but he peered in turn as she put her cross against the name.

He handed the child into her arms. She turned the boy to her, looking into his eyes.

'Have you any news of his mother?' she asked, dropping her voice.

The praetorian knew better than to gossip in the open street. He shook his head, putting away the square of parchment that was the only sign the boy was alive.

'Gone,' he murmured. 'That's all I know.'

As he turned away, he passed a little package into her hand, just a sudden pressure, and then he was mounting up with the others. Domitia Lepida did not peer at it until they had ridden away. Half the families in the street seemed to be looking out by then, so she went inside before she unwrapped whatever it was.

Remi came to see, of course, always curious. She held up a gold wedding band and a jewelled bracelet. The actor reached for the last in wonder and she slapped his hand away.

'I'll have to sell that, so keep your hands off. It will keep us for a while, if we're careful. Beyond that, I don't know.'

She looked at the little boy the praetorians had brought, staring round in the gloom with big, dark eyes.

‘This is your new home, son,’ she told him. ‘I am your aunt Domitia. It’s not much, is it? I had the same reaction when I found I suddenly owned nothing.’

His lip was trembling again and she gave him a little push, sending him tottering. In a way, he and his mother Agrippina were responsible for all the troubles that had befallen their family. It was hard not to hate the little bastard.

The island of Pontia was a grey place in autumn rain. There was no violence to the clouds, only a constant drizzle that drenched the crew of the galley as they reached the docks. Agrippina had no maids with her, no sign that she was anything but a prisoner. Only the gruff kindness Centurion Italus showed was any reminder of the status she had known before. All she could do was stare at the sea, listening to hissing rain as the galley ropes were tied off.

No welcome had been arranged, not without the emperor at her side. She had returned with all she knew and loved stripped away. As the gangplank was lowered to the docks, Italus took her hand and kept her steady on rain-slick wood.

At least someone had thought to bring a horse and a mule. Agrippina wondered if it was the same animal that had carried her before. The person she had been then seemed almost within touching distance, as if she could just reach out and have the world turn the right way up once more. Instead, Italus helped her to sit and then dismissed his men.

‘I’ll take her. She won’t run,’ he told them.

They were like blocks themselves, their faces carefully blank. Agrippina wondered how many had been there on

her previous visit. Perhaps her fate was a reminder of how quickly any man – or any woman – could fall in Caligula's Rome.

The rain beat harder on her stola, soaking through as the road rose beneath the animals. They walked with heads low, enduring the downpour. Agrippina could feel herself breathing faster, beginning to panic after so long held in perfect control. She had not screamed or fought them, not on the journey out to the coast or across the sea, not when the island had come into view. She had said almost nothing, retreating into herself.

Now, she and Italus were alone and fear was a third figure standing between them, its hands on the reins.

'Italus,' she said.

It was as if he had been waiting for her to speak.

'Don't ask,' he said immediately. 'I can't let you go. If I don't do exactly as I've been ordered, the emperor will have my head. My wife ran off with a carpenter, but she can be found. My children are still young. I can't take risks with their fate, not for anyone.'

She didn't say anything and he grimaced, cursing himself for mentioning his children. He knew her son had been passed off to some branch of her husband's family, deep in the slums. Italus supposed the boy was only alive until the emperor had his own heir. That was not a thought he would say aloud, at least while this extraordinary woman could hear him. He watched her as she rode, entranced as he had never felt with anyone before. His wife had never moved him in such a way, though perhaps that was why she'd taken the children and left.

He thought he could just watch Agrippina all day and be satisfied. There was something in the grace and shape

of her face that went beyond mere desire. She moved . . . He could not explain it, even to himself. He just wanted to be near her. The thought of delivering her into the dark hole and then leaving that place for ever was a cruelty he could still hardly believe.

‘I will have a word with the lads at the cells, Agrippina,’ he said.

Her name on his lips made him tremble. He was not a fifteen-year-old boy, he reminded himself, shaking with the excitement of first love. He was a grown man, an experienced man! It might have been amusing if the situation wasn’t so grim.

‘I’ll tell them you are to be well treated, and I’ll leave a few coins for better food.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, closing her eyes. ‘I’ll pray for the strength to endure, or to be delivered out of the dark. I can do that, if it isn’t for ever. I can hold on, Italus. That’s all I can do. I can hold on.’

The journey seemed much shorter than it had before. Agrippina took his hand to dismount and her thigh brushed him as he helped her down. Italus felt himself flushing once more. He cleared his throat, trying hard to be gruff and in command.

‘I gave the ring and bracelet to a friend of mine. He’ll pass them on with your son.’

‘Is Lucius all right?’ she asked immediately, desperate for news.

‘He’s safe, with an aunt. He’ll be looked after, I promise. Now, be strong for this bit. Ready?’ He drew in a breath. ‘Prisoner!’ he said loudly.

They both heard steps and a stranger came out, glancing up in distaste at rain falling in sheets.

‘You picked a fine day for it,’ he said.

The man stopped dead when he saw the way Agrippina’s robe clung to her. Italus frowned at that. He tapped the other on his shoulder.

‘Which regiment?’

‘VI Ferrata.’

‘Right. I am Centurion Gaius Italus Passienus, first cohort, praetorians. This lady is the sister of the emperor, do you understand? If she is not treated with perfect courtesy, you will answer to me – and then to him. Do you understand?’

The man blinked in the rain, nodding his head. Italus didn’t press the point, though he had overreached his authority. If it ever came out that he had invoked the emperor’s power in such a way . . . He had put himself in danger, exactly as he’d said he wouldn’t. He could feel Agrippina’s attention on him, though her head was lowered. Remembering, Italus fished a little purse of coin from his belt. He handed it to the legionary and the man hefted it in appreciation. As well he might, Italus thought ruefully. It was three months’ pay and all his savings, just about. Yet he handed it over as if it was nothing, as if there might be other purses in the man’s future. He did not regret it, however.

‘There, my lady. I have to leave now. I’m, er . . . sorry it has come to this,’ Italus said. His eyes were willing her to keep her dignity.

The legionary took her by her arm and Italus was pleased to see it was gentle enough. He hoped the warnings would stick and wondered how far he would go in vengeance if they did not. Further than he had planned, he realised, surprised at himself. He’d cut the man’s heart out if he hurt her.

For her part, Agrippina bowed her head. She did not look back as the legionary took her into the outer, lighted section of the cells – and then past, deeper and deeper to the darkness beyond.

Italus stood for a moment, then cursed aloud. He tied the two animals together, nose to nose, then went after them.

The legionary guard was not very far inside when he turned to see why this burly praetorian was coming in. He dropped a hand to the sword on his hip and Italus raised open palms to reassure him.

‘I thought I’d better do my duty and see her to the cell,’ Italus said. ‘If I have to describe it to the emperor, after.’

The man nodded reluctantly, gesturing for Agrippina to go on. He did not seem pleased to have Italus there. This was his realm and he scowled, feeling intruded upon. The light was already fading with every step and Italus could see Agrippina’s fear growing.

‘Why so far from the door?’ Italus asked.

The man shrugged.

‘The way we do it, that’s all. First prisoner goes in cell number one. That’s at the back. There’s no one else here now, not since Gemellus.’

‘I think we can do better than that for the emperor’s sister, don’t you?’ Italus said. He chuckled as he spoke, inviting the man into his companionship. Instead, the legionary just stared.

‘Not the way it’s done,’ he said, stubbornly.

Italus wanted to knock him down, but he couldn’t leave Agrippina to the mercy of a man he’d hurt or humiliated. It was a neat trap and he hated himself as he smiled.

‘Fair enough,’ he said.

Agrippina had been watching. She turned away then, stiff and afraid as the way darkened. Italus didn't speak again until she was in the final cell, where Gemellus had lived his last years. As the door closed, she came to stand by the bars, looking out. The legionary waited, of course. The man stood with narrowed eyes, suspecting something.

'I'll do what I can,' Italus said.

He made himself turn his back, before he incriminated both of them further. Agrippina watched them both leave, taking light and hope.

Outside, Italus took up the reins of the mule and mounted his horse once again, clicking in his cheek to start both animals. The rain was easing, he noted. There were patches of blue sky showing and he felt a corresponding lift in his own spirits. He tried not to think of her as he turned his back on the prison and went down to the docks.

PART TWO

AD 4I

I4

The young woman wept as she ate. Her husband was all too aware of her distress, including the silent tears that spilled over her lashes and ran down her cheeks. He said nothing at all. The invitation to dine had come from the emperor himself. It would have been disastrous to refuse, and so they had come to the palace, pale and afraid as evening settled over Rome.

For his part, Caligula seemed relaxed, even amused. He leaned on both elbows, lying on his stomach across from the senator and his wife. At times, he raised his feet up behind him, kicking idly like a child lying on grass. He rested his chin on one hand or both, in between emptying his cup and watching it refilled. He was flushed with wine that evening, moved to consume more than his usual amount. He licked his lips between courses, his tongue pink and wet.

Platters of food were brought and barely tasted before being replaced, apparently in an endless stream. The emperor seemed not to mind the stilted conversation up to that point. Brass cups were filled with wine so red the

base of the bowl was hidden, warm as blood on a summer's evening. All the while, tears spilled from the young woman, making her blind.

'A little more light, I think,' Caligula said softly.

Slaves moved around the low tables, bringing oil and a lit taper. The senator fastened his gaze on that movement, anything but be forced to notice his wife's tears. He saw the slaves slosh oil into a huge bronze bowl, larger across than a man was tall. When they touched the taper to it, there was a fine crackling and a line of smoke before it began to burn clean. The light grew, spreading across that room and out to the city below. For those on the streets, it would be a beacon on the Palatine.

'There, that's better,' the emperor said. 'I can see you now – and your beautiful wife, of course.'

Senator Alcius dared not look at the woman he loved. If Caligula was intent on taking her to his rooms after the meal, there was nothing he could do. He had married her with the implicit promise of his protection, but the emperor stood above such things – across all oaths. All he could do was make it worse: by looking at her, by letting Gaius Caesar know he was afraid. In the silence of his thoughts, he begged his wife to stop crying. If she angered the emperor, neither of them would leave, that night or the following morning. Alcius had explained as much after the summons, on their way to the Palatine.

It did no good. Tears dribbled kohl from her eyes onto her cheeks, like twin trails of soot. All her husband could do was ignore it.

'You must try the clams, senator,' Caligula said. 'I had them brought in from the coast this very morning. They are as fresh and sweet as anything you'll ever taste. Please.'

A slave ladled a collection of glistening white and orange meat onto his plate. His wife looked over, near mindless in her fear.

‘Let your husband try them first, my dear,’ Caligula said. ‘Alcius has forty boats, does he not? A fishing fleet to feed the great markets of Rome. They say Alcius is a man who knows the ways of the sea – and all its fruits.’

‘These are superb,’ the senator said, bowing his head in acknowledgement. He took a gulp of wine, tasting the metal of the cup’s rim. There was a little bitterness there, but he could not show displeasure, not at the emperor’s table. In truth, Alcius had always loved shellfish, but it had to be in its season and very fresh. He covered the taste with a few grapes from a fine bunch, cold and perfect, each as crisp as an apple.

‘Forty boats . . .’ Caligula murmured. ‘All flinging nets onto dark waters, plying their trade while the city sleeps, bringing up fish and squid, then selling the catch. Hard work, I’m sure. Honest work. Vital for the city, wouldn’t you say?’

Alcius belched softly into a fist.

‘It has been my honour to serve Rome, Majesty, of course.’

‘And you own the fish market as well, do you not, senator? You rent dock places to boat crews. Why, you control the salt houses, the fishmongers, the carters – everything from the sea to the plate! These clams may be from one of your own boats, Alcius! Rome is a ravenous maw, senator, a stomach that has to be filled every single day. I wonder, how much do you make in a month from all my people? For your fish and your labours?’

The senator grew flushed and began to stammer. He

could feel discomfort in his stomach and wondered when he would be released. There had been so many dishes, he'd lost count. The results did not sit well with him. His bowels felt like they squirmed with live eels.

'I don't have the exact amounts with me, Majesty. My taxes are all paid and up to date. I can provide accounts, of course, if you will allow me a little time to prepare them.'

Caligula waved a hand.

'There's no need for suspicion, not between us. You are a man of honour, Senator Alcius. I have asked about you, many times. Your people all admire you. Do you believe me, senator?'

'I-I hope so . . . Majesty, I . . .'

'Are you a good man, Alcius? I would not like to dine with a scoundrel.'

'Yes, I . . . with the blessings of the gods . . .'

The older man felt an ache spread in his stomach, moving quickly. He glanced at the plate of clams in sudden fear. Caligula beamed at him as he began to choke, his throat closing.

'A good man, an honourable man . . . might make an offering of that wondrous fleet, don't you think? Speak quickly now, senator. Will you give them to me?'

Senator Alcius nodded, his hand rising to his neck as he tried to take a breath. The sound of him sucking air was a rising whistle. His wife turned to him, her mouth opening to reveal chewed food.

'If the clams disagree with you, you might want to try that *particular* jug of wine,' Caligula said.

He watched as the senator reached out, his face already purpling. The man's eyes bulged as he poured with a shaking hand, spilling precious drops on the table. There was

no antidote for the poison he had been given, or not one that Caligula knew. There was certainly nothing in that jug but a reasonable red from Sicilia. He watched as the man's iron will let him gulp and swallow, though he could no longer draw breath. Hope was an ember, burning bright. The triumph of will over the flesh was, in its own way, magnificent.

'When I was a little boy, my father commanded legions in Germania. He had three sons and three daughters, but never enough time to watch us. You'll know something of that, Alcius, with your own boys growing up. We ran wild!'

The senator slumped onto the cushions, his cup clattering as it fell to the floor. His wife ignored the sound, staring straight ahead, her eyes blank.

'Oh, some days, our tutors crammed in a little learning, but in the summers, we swam or learned to ride on legion mounts. There was Nero and Drusus – and me – then Agrippina, Drusilla and Livilla, though she was too young really.'

The emperor paused, touching his eye as if a tear might have trembled there. The senator jerked and twisted, revealing swollen features as he strangled. Slaves scurried around him to collect the fallen cup and mop spilled wine.

'Drusilla was my favourite, Alcius. I imagine you have one, amongst your own. Agrippina was always so sharp, while Drusilla . . . adored me. You know? Of course you do. We learned to write and read in those forests, but the lessons I recall best were from a legion smith. He had a way with metal, Alcius. You should have seen what he could do.'

Silence returned and Caligula leaned over, stroking the dead man's hair, his head resting on the heel of the other hand.

He watched the young wife with bright eyes for a long time as she continued to eat and drink. Only slowly spilling tears revealed her turmoil. He nodded, smiling.

‘That smith loved herbs and frosts from the ground. With his passion as our guide, we learned all he could teach us. More than the colour of metal as it cools! We were such innocents, my dear. Yet we learned of aconite and arsenic, of oleander and foxglove, even of a strangely potent powder made from apricot kernels. That something so sweet can produce something so bitter!’

He slapped idly at her husband’s cheek. There was no response.

‘It is a difficult taste to mask, but I find the fruits of the sea do it rather well. You witnessed his offer to me, my dear. I have so many new ventures. The funds I need for them! Your husband’s extraordinary generosity will mean I can finish my new theatre, or at least the marble facing. If you could have the deeds for the fish market and fleet brought to my offices here, I would be eternally grateful.’

He eyed the still figure of her husband with a moue of distaste.

‘I think perhaps your husband has drunk too much.’

Caligula raised his eyes to his slaves and the body was taken away. If the man’s wife noticed how carefully they removed the little dish of clams, she gave no sign.

For a time, there was only the sound of the woman chewing, her hands trembling as still more dishes were brought in and removed. She was young and shapely enough. Caligula considered summoning her to his personal chambers for a time. There was something unpleasant about her mindless champing that put him off.

‘I believe I can rest now, my dear. My days are almost

unending, but I do sleep when duty allows. Please don't forget the owner's seals tomorrow. I don't want to have to send for your sons.'

'Thank you, M-Majesty,' she said, stepping off the cushioned couches to kneel.

The emperor waved a hand, his thoughts far away. He walked out of the dining room and his praetorians fell in beside him. It was a new twelve, he noted vaguely. He'd had three of the last ones executed, their estates confiscated and added to the imperial treasury. Soldiers of the praetorian guard should not be wealthy in their own right! Even those of the equestrian class were meant to live lives of simple duty, with honesty and stoicism as their watchwords. Sejanus had indulged them for too long, raising their numbers to six thousand, building them new barracks. The costs were appalling, requiring a flood of silver and almost the same number of expert hands to make and repair their kit. Ten thousand or more took their pay to keep praetorians marching and exercising and training, all without ever facing an actual foe in battle. They may have been the elite, but by Jupiter, they didn't do much to earn the honour!

He swept down the corridor to his private rooms.

'I have been considering an audit of the praetorian accounts,' he announced as he walked. 'I imagine there are savings to be made. Sejanus indulged you, but I do not believe he was a military man, not as I am. I will send investigators tomorrow to see where cuts might be made. Yes . . .'

A weight came down on his shoulder. For a moment, Gaius could not understand what had struck him. It was death to touch the emperor and he had not felt the press

of a hand without invitation for an age. Two years before, one of the praetorians had grabbed his arm, pulling him back from a bolting horse. The action had almost certainly saved his life, but the man had still been impaled for it. He'd gone to his death with dignity, Gaius remembered.

For an instant, the emperor actually looked up, as if part of the ceiling had collapsed. By the time he understood, they were drawing swords.

'You *blaspheme!*' Gaius roared. 'I am your emperor!'

His voice lashed them, stunning them for a beat. Then one of them struck him in the stomach with a legionary's dagger, the wide-bladed thing sinking to the hilt. Gaius gaped at him.

'Herminius . . . ? Your *oath*, man! How can you do this? Italus! Kill him . . . any one of you! Quickly! Put this whore-son down. I will give you a nation.'

More blades showed, the sound of them being drawn a hiss in that narrow space. Gaius began to call for help, but the pain was terrible and there was no wavering, no mercy in them. The praetorians struck as one might kill a wild dog, with hard eyes and absolute certainty. A dozen blades found the emperor's flesh through his robe, so that blood sprayed on the polished stones. He could *hear* it, Gaius realised. The air glittered and he could hear the noise of drops falling.

He sank to his knees and they stepped back, knives red in the light of torches. He could only gape at them, blackness swirling, blood pouring from his wounds. Death was coming. They knew their business, those men. He tried to speak, but his mouth filled and though he spat and coughed, he could not clear it. He leaned then, bracing himself on an arm while they looked at him. One of them

made to lunge again, knife ready. It was the centurion who stopped him.

‘He’s done,’ Italus said. ‘That’s it, lads.’

Gaius felt his arm give way. He eased onto his back, breathing wetly, blood spilling from his mouth. He felt panic spreading. He was dying and they were all looking at each other like children. The gods would know their names. The fools!

‘What now?’ one of the others said.

They looked to Italus and Gaius too followed him with his gaze, watching a centurion he had trusted. It was impossible. Gaius was just twenty-eight years old and emperor. Who were they to deny the honour of Apollo and Zeus, the divine-in-flesh who ruled in Rome? Blasphemers, heretics, they would all burn. He longed to tell them so, but blood filled his throat.

Italus leaned over him, raising one eyelid with a rough thumb. The emperor’s eyes still moved and Caligula willed himself to resist even death. As he hissed and crackled, his sight dulled. The flow of blood slowed and stopped.

‘He’s gone,’ Italus said softly. He glared at Herminius.

‘I didn’t want to move tonight! We’re not ready.’

‘You heard him,’ Herminius growled. ‘He was going to send his damned taxmen to the regiment. No one crosses the praetorians. No one.’

He was still in the throes of violence, Italus could see. The praetorian stood with his dagger raised, breathing hard. It took some men like that.

‘Put that thing away,’ Italus snapped, taking command in the stillness. ‘Wipe it and sheathe it. It’s done. We may not have planned it for tonight, but we all knew it was coming. All right? So calm down and think. In this moment,

we are the only ones who know, but when that changes, it goes out like a bird on the wing.'

'Who is the heir?' Herminius asked gruffly.

Italus fixed him with a hard stare until he realised he had not done as he was told. Only when he had wiped and returned his blade to its sheath did Italus reply.

'There is a child in the slum quarters, but he's too young.'

Italus thought of Agrippina in her cell and his expression changed. He had dreamed of this night. To have it suddenly thrust upon him was overwhelming.

'Whoever it is, he won't want us as guards,' Herminius grunted.

The others blinked, the truth of the words dawning on all of them. They'd killed Caligula like the mad dog he had become, but that would not absolve them. Whoever took up the title of emperor would see them all killed. How could they be trusted, after this? Italus saw panic begin to bloom in them and thought furiously.

'Caligula had no sons, by blood or by adoption. His second wife isn't pregnant, is she?'

Two of them shook their heads and he breathed in relief. All those in that corridor on the Palatine were hard men, used to violence. Even so, he saw they were edging apart as reality came home. If they were to be hunted, perhaps they should get out of Rome ahead of the news, to give their families a fighting chance.

'The only one left is his uncle,' Italus murmured.

The idea took root and he saw them glancing at one another, testing it. Of course it was Herminius who spoke first, the praetorian's voice full of scorn.

'Claudius? That old fool? Even the slaves whipped him and mocked his stammer. I've seen him kicked and

blindfolded, humiliated . . .’ He broke off, suddenly thoughtful.

‘Yes,’ Italus said. ‘Claudius is not a man to bear a grudge, or even if he is, he has cause to thank the men who *saved him* from his nephew and *made him emperor*. Perhaps we’ll keep our lives yet.’

‘Where is he? Anyone know?’

Two of the praetorians gestured further down the corridor. They pointed to a door not a dozen paces ahead.

‘I saw him in the library earlier,’ one of them said.

They exchanged glances.

‘Do you think he heard . . . all this?’

Herminius jerked a thumb at the corpse of the emperor. At any moment, the cry would go up. The corridor was still mercifully empty, but it would not remain so.

‘We can’t undo it, even if he did. Come on, let’s get the body out of sight.’

Italus nodded and took hold of Caligula with another of the men. Even in that moment, it felt wrong to lay hands on him. He clenched his jaw and they dragged him along the corridor. One of them opened a door and they carried Caligula to a couch.

The room was tall-ceilinged and filled with the smell of parchment and old papyrus. There was a huge window there that looked out on the city. Next to it was a tiny oil lamp and a table, piled high with scrolls. A breeze tugged at curtains and Italus was the first to notice something wrong with the scene. He froze like a boar hound scenting prey, dropping one hand to the knife on his belt. The others noticed, of course. They left their positions like sentinels around the body and moved on silent sandals across the room.

As he reached the window, Italus flung back the curtain, revealing the diminutive form of the emperor's uncle, staring up at them. Claudius had never been a soldier. Slight of frame and already going bald, he was a figure of fun in the court, mocked and embarrassed at every turn. He was trembling, Italus saw. The soldier regarded the man for a long moment.

'Emperor Gaius Caesar is dead,' Italus said clearly. 'Caligula is dead. Long live the emperor.'

'What?' Claudius replied. 'I heard shrieking outside, so I hid. I-is my n-nephew . . .' His stammer grew more pronounced with every word, but the eyes were not those of a fool. He understood and Italus could see anger rising in the way he clenched his fists. He hoped it was merely fury at the betrayal of his body, the lips that were so much slower than his thoughts.

'The emperor . . . has been killed,' Italus said as gently as he could. 'To save us all.'

He did not look back at the men surrounding him. They might remember the fates of those who had killed Julius Caesar some eighty years before. Not one had died a natural death. Not a single one.

'The senate won't accept it,' Herminius said, always the voice of warning in that group. Italus glowered at him but the man only shrugged. 'Well, they won't.'

'They *bated* Caligula,' one of the others said. 'I've lost count of how many he put to torture for a confession. Dozens? Scores? He threatened to make that damned horse of his consul over the rest! No, they'll be grateful he's dead.'

Herminius shook his head. He looked apologetically at Claudius, the little man staring from one to the other.

‘Begging your pardon, dominus,’ he said. ‘You may be of the bloodline, but you’re no soldier. My guess is the senate will appoint someone else before sun-up, the moment the news gets out. Maybe one of the consuls, until they have secured the succession.’

Somewhere nearby, they could hear shrieking begin. There were always slaves to see – and to report. Italus and Herminius exchanged a worried glance. Events were moving and they were being swept up.

‘We could take Claudius . . .’ Italus paused. ‘*Emperor* Claudius out to the barracks. If all the praetorians acclaim him as emperor, there isn’t a thing they can do about it. Agreed?’

‘Em . . . em . . . peror? W-what . . . ?’

Claudius was red-faced with the effort of forcing words out. Italus had to make himself remember the man had written histories in both Latin and Greek. Claudius may have sounded simple, but he had a superb memory. It was true he was no soldier, but he was of the line – and he wasn’t a vengeful man. The weak scribe who had hidden behind a curtain was their only chance at survival.

Italus saw Herminius and the others come to the same conclusion. It was the only plan they had and they were not complex men. He saw them nod, putting the strain of decision behind. Once a plan had been agreed, Italus knew he could build a temple on any one of them. They would not fail.

‘Emperor,’ they said, each man echoing the last. One by one, they knelt to Claudius. He looked around in something like awe, but the word was powerful. Italus thought he stood just a little taller than before.

‘Very well. Let’s get you away from the Palatine, Majesty,’ Herminius said.

He stood back, allowing the smaller man a clear path to the door. Of course that meant Claudius saw his nephew, sprawled and glassy-eyed where they had left him. He walked over as if in a trance, looking down.

With care, Claudius spat on the corpse before turning away. The praetorians exchanged glances at that, hope sprouting in them.

At the door, Herminius saw Italus begin to turn in a different direction. He reached out and stopped him with a hand on his arm.

‘Aren’t you coming?’ They had moved on from the killing, but trust was a new thing in that group, wet as a newborn and about as fragile.

‘I have somewhere else I need to be . . .’ Italus paused then, glancing at the man they had raised to rule the world. He went down on one knee.

‘Dominus, your niece Agrippina remains in exile. May I bring her home?’

‘Y-yes . . . you . . . m-may,’ Claudius replied.

He let himself be swept along then, leaving Italus alone in the gloomy corridor. Blood had smeared under his sandals, Italus noticed. There were running steps all around that place, voices calling in alarm. The news was out. The whole city would hear the emperor was dead before the sun rose, but he was ahead of it in that moment. He rose and began to run.

I 5

Domitia Lepida entered the forum, her gaze seeking the child she had helped raise. She relaxed when she spotted him, chatting to a stranger. At four, Lucius was a little block of a boy, with fine shoulders and well-muscled legs. He did well with the cup when she sent him to beg for coin – there was just something endearing about him that brought in more than anyone else in the household. Honestly, there were days when they would all have gone hungry if not for the tanned and chubby four-year-old raising his cup and calling ‘coin for food’ to every passer-by. It had to be in the forum, though. Lucius went out each day at dawn, making his way past the old whores coming home – and greeting each one by name. Those women seemed to think he was adorable. Some of them even pressed a coin of their night’s wage into his hand, to ‘get him started’. Domitia could hardly understand that. She supposed some women would always be soft on boys. She found them rather irritating herself.

There wasn’t much point begging in the street where

they both lived. No one had money there, certainly not money to spare. No, the forum was where wealthy merchants came or votaries to the temples. It was where senators and consuls and priests hurried past, deep in thought or prayer. The sight of that nut-brown boy with tousled black hair and a rogueish expression shook coins from them like leaves in autumn. Domitia had refused to believe he hadn't stolen his first day's haul. She'd had to tell the kid to empty his cup into a purse she sewed to go under his tunic, rather than make himself a target for thieves. She worried he would be beaten up and robbed each day, when they had come to depend on what he made. It was certainly more than she could bring to their house, never mind the others. Domitia repaired clothes and blankets with neat stitches, but there were many women like her and the work didn't pay much. She hadn't seen meat in half a year, never mind clean oil or the perfume she had once loved.

She bit her lip at that thought, pressing it away. She had enjoyed scents worth more than she saw then in a year. Without even knowing the cost, she had drenched herself in oils that had travelled half the world to reach her neck and the insides of her wrists. These days, she smelled of sweat and smoke – on a good day. Being clean cost money.

'Lucius!' she called.

The little boy turned at his own name and his face lit up. Something twisted inside the older woman and she sighed to herself. He was not her son. She had not thought she would form a liking for the little tub, but there . . . there it was, even so.

'Aunty!' he called, waving.

He raised his arms to be picked up and she shook her

head. He was big for his age and it made her hips ache to carry him any distance. She saw the disappointment on his face and relented, drawing him up.

‘What tickets do we have?’ he asked.

His aunt wiped sweat from her brow with her free hand.

‘That depends,’ she said. ‘Did you fill the cup?’

He beamed at her and her sternness melted away.

‘I did,’ he whispered. ‘Lots of coppers . . . Someone put a silver sesterce in!’ He patted his hip and the hidden purse jingled. ‘I have it safe. Now – theatre or the races?’

It was a fortune and Domitia Lepida smiled with genuine pleasure.

‘Let it be your choice.’

It was one advantage of having lodgers in the house. Remi was always in one of the theatres, though usually as part of the chorus rather than in a leading role. He would either pick up unsold tickets or just wait at a door on the street to sneak them in. The other was a barber for one of the racing teams. Simeon cut hair for the charioteers – and then trimmed the manes of their horses for them. Neither earned enough to move away from their rooms in the eaves, but at least those jobs came with perks. On most evenings, Domitia Lepida would take her little nephew to a play or a chariot race. Lucius loved them all – and there was something about the roar of the crowd that widened his smile.

‘The races, I think,’ he said, after a serious pause.

Domitia felt her hip begin to ache. He was getting heavier, which was no surprise with all the barley porridge and vegetable mash he ate. The little terror was solid for a four-year-old, with good teeth and proper muscles. She had seen him copying the exercises he’d seen the charioteers do.

‘Let’s put you down, then,’ she said.

He kissed her on the cheek and slid to the ground, making a whooshing sound that summoned a smile to her face. The gods had not granted her children of her own, but Lucius had brought laughter into her life after she’d thought it had gone for ever. The pain of hunger or a rotten tooth with no coin to have it pulled – that was the reality of her life in those latter days. There would come a time too when she could no longer see to stitch and that frightened her. Yet Lucius eased her worries, or made her forget for a time.

‘You’ll have to form your letters before dark,’ she said.

He nodded, owlishly. Both of them knew it would be forgotten in the excitement of the chariot races. She could not afford oil for her cracked old lamps. The house went dark with sunset and he could not see to work his little slate and lead stylus. Somehow, he still improved, whenever she remembered to check. Lucius was a bright boy and he wanted to please her. There were times when she wondered if he even remembered his mother or father.

They hurried around the Palatine hill, with Domitia Lepida casting glances up to the buildings of government there. She could not help frowning, and of course the little boy who kept his hand in hers noticed. She had to tug his arm to stand him against a wall as a troop of praetorians came crashing past. They were a battering ram in that place, with the crowd expected to get out of their way.

‘Are you all right, aunty?’ Lucius asked.

‘Of course. I was just thinking of the dear emperor and all he has done for us.’

There was a hard note in her voice and the little boy heard it and tilted his head.

‘You said he sent me to you, aunty. That was good, wasn’t it?’

She looked down at him and saw his usual smile had vanished.

‘Of *course* it was, Lucius! That was the only good thing he did, I sometimes think. If Caligula hadn’t sent you to live with me, I might not have known you at all. There’s luck, now. There’s a blessing.’

He seemed pleased to hear that. The praetorians had rattled past on whatever business concerned them that evening. Domitia took him up once more, sweeping the boy along with the crowd. The races began while it was still light and as she neared the Circus Maximus, half of those with them seemed to be heading to the main gates. Domitia felt herself buffeted as the numbers thickened. She had to slap a hand away as someone pinched her buttock, a sly opportunist lost in the crowd when she turned around to glare. She kept hold of Lucius with an iron grip, even when he stumbled.

The door in the side street was a relief when they found it, set back just enough to find shelter from the crowd’s press, like fish leaping onto a bank. Domitia stared at the mass of citizens rushing towards the gates. Still facing them, she rapped her knuckles down by her hip, a pattern they had agreed.

The door opened and she and Lucius went in. Domitia turned with a light comment ready. What she saw changed her expression to shock.

‘Remi! Oh, what happened to you? What are you doing here? Where’s Simeon?’

The actor sighed, long fingers reaching up to dab at his swollen face.

‘Shaving some design into the flanks of the Green horses, or whatever it is they have him do. I don’t know. He seemed pleased enough to be asked. Here, I have seat numbers for you – unsold. If anyone asks, you are a friend of Senator Quintus Sura – or a cousin.’

‘Senator Quintus Sura. Very well, but what happened?’

She made a gesture that took in Remi’s battered face and swirled around the child at her side, watching and listening with perfect attention. Domitia had an idea of what Remi did in his free time, sometimes for pay. The theatres were his natural arena, with busy crowds of men, many of them drunk. If they were not hiring, or closed between shows, he would often be found at the racetrack. His face was swollen on one side and one of his lips had been broken. He looked hurt and it was nothing to do with physical pain. He was used to that. No, this was more like outrage.

He took in the presence of the little boy and smiled at his landlady.

‘Just a difference of opinion with two young gentlemen, Domitia, that is all. They wanted more than I was willing to offer. When I refused, they decided to take it anyway, for free. All very unpleasant, my dear. Men can be rather cruel, can’t they? When they want to be. It was not the first time. I doubt it will be the last.’

Domitia reached out to touch his face in sympathy. He flinched away, tears coming to his eyes.

‘It’s my fault. I should have known better, I really should. I take too many risks! You’ve said it a thousand times. They take and take . . . and then they go back to their wives and children, while I have nothing.’

He was close to weeping and she squeezed his hand, wanting him to be still. Lucius was looking from one to the

other, of course, aware of something adult they did not want to share with him. Remi was hurting, he understood that much. The little boy brought out his day's collection of coins and tried to hand them to Remi.

Domitia was faster. She snatched the little bag away.

'I'll look after that,' she said hastily.

Remi's hand still hovered in the air, so she sighed and rummaged in it, fishing out the silver coin.

'Go on, take this,' she said. 'Get something to eat for the house. Don't spend it all on that soldier's vinegar you call wine, Remi!'

'I won't,' he said. 'It would sting the cut on my lip anyway.'

Just having a coin in his hand had raised his mood, she was pleased to see. Domitia looked down the outer ring, where doorways of light led to the seats, all numbered. She could hear the crowd chanting for the first race.

'Come on, Lucius,' she said.

She patted Remi on the arm as they passed by. Her mood was light. She hadn't eaten since dawn, which might have had something to do with it. Perhaps she too liked the heft of the coins Lucius had won for them. Yet it was more than that. There had not been many good days since her family fortune had been stolen by the emperor. She knew she had to take moments of joy where she found them.

'Is Uncle Remi all right?' Lucius asked, looking back. 'Why did they hurt him?'

Domitia's mouth became a thin line.

'Never you mind. He really does take too many risks. He trusts . . . too much and too often. There are snakes in the world, Lucius. Not everyone has a kind heart.'

'Does Remi have a kind heart?' the boy asked.

Lepida sighed.

‘He does, Lucius, yes. But the world does not always reward that, do you see? If you trust too much, there are men who will come and take all you have. Your home, your servants, your . . . innocence. You remember that.’

The child nodded sternly, copying her expression as she found the right archway and went through, into the evening light. Domitia saw two empty seats in the front row and presented the clay tokens to an usher standing in the aisle there. That young man looked shaken and pale, and she felt a pang of worry Simeon and Remi had been given forged tickets. As she looked around, Domitia Lepida realised the noise of the crowd had changed. The roar had gone. Instead, she heard a susurrantion of whispering voices, the murmur of bad news.

‘What is it?’ she asked the usher.

‘Emperor Gaius is dead,’ he said, eyes wide with awe. ‘Caligula is dead.’

Domitia reached out and grabbed him by his tunic, drawing him close. She glanced at the little boy at her side, then turned to the usher as he struggled to break her grip. He was not strong enough, she noted with satisfaction. Or she was too determined.

‘Who is emperor now?’ she asked him.

‘I don’t know! Take your hands . . . off me!’ He stopped struggling when she didn’t move, giving up. ‘The praetorians are proclaiming someone this evening. If you know Senator Sura, you’ll know more than me anyway.’

Domitia blinked at the name, then looked at the empty seats still waiting for them. There were more gaps in the front row, stretching around the curve of the open track, as far as she could see. The men of power were missing

and she had not noticed, nor understood the significance. The senate would be holding an emergency meeting. She cursed under her breath and let the young man go. He scrambled away, not daring to say anything more to one who held a senator's ticket.

'Come, Lucius,' she said. 'I'm afraid we can't stay.'

'We're here now! Just one race?' he pleaded.

Domitia was firm. The crowd was no longer focused on the track. Even the teams that had come out seemed to be milling around, without the usual brittle energy before a race. The death of any emperor was news to shake the city, of course. The death of Caligula was something more. She wanted to breathe in open air, to shout and wave her arms. Yet in four years of his reign, she had learned to watch what she said, at least where others could hear. An awful thought presented itself. Could it be a ruse? Caligula loved games. It would not be beyond him to fake his own death and then see who celebrated. No, she would find Remi and head home – to think what to do.

'Did you not hear, Lucius? Your *uncle* has died,' she said.

The words felt strange and she looked thoughtfully at the little boy she had come to love as a son. He knew the theatre and the racetrack. He knew the best begging spots on the forum and the names of half a dozen whores. They had not seen a decent meal for a year or longer. Yet he was also the nephew of Caligula. What that meant, she did not yet know, but she felt the pain of hope unfurling within her. It was hope that killed you, that was what people said. And it was true.

Italus stepped onto the docks at Pontia, his gaze drifting up the hill. He had gone ahead of the news on the galley.

Word was spreading from the city to the provinces, carried by imperial heralds to every region of the empire. The message to the twenty-eight legions was simple: 'Emperor Gaius is dead. Hold fast.' Those words meant that the ultimate authority of all their lives was absent, at least for a time. No general would move without further orders. If he was fighting a war, he would retreat to the camp of the night before and fortify the position. Negotiations halted, deals were postponed, slaves sent back to their coffles without being sold. Of course, there would be fortunes made in the brief period of confusion. Some men were clever at seeing opportunity, even in disaster. They would guess at the price of oil or wheat and complete a bigger order before the axe came down, risking fortunes to make even more.

Italus wondered if the prefect of the VI Ferrata on Pontia would benefit from the news he brought. He had not expected to be first with it, though it made sense. He'd raced west from Rome, changing horses at a legion tavern and reaching the port before morning. That had been a difficult moment, as he'd lacked any official permission to order a galley crew onto deep waters. It had taken all the authority he'd earned as a centurion of the first cohort to override the objections. Of course news had to be carried to the islands! Italus had come close to striking the galley captain, but it would just have made trouble for him. In the end, the man had given way before Italus was quite ready to knock him out. They hadn't said a word in a day of hard rowing. Italus spent his time at the prow when he wasn't eating the slop the rowers were given.

To set foot on Pontia again was something he had dreamed about. He rubbed his jaw as he stood there,

swaying slightly as he adjusted. He needed to be shaved and to bathe, but he wouldn't get the chance.

The legate of the VI Ferrata had seen the galley coming in, this time without the imperial flag on its mast. He'd ridden out from his barracks even so, accompanied by his senior officers. Italus had to assume island duty was a tedious one, for the most part. Well, he had brought a little excitement with him.

He saluted the legate as he came to a halt on the docks. Some of the praetorians held that being the personal guard to emperors meant they were the senior service. This was not the place to stand on his dignity, however.

'Centurion Gaius Italus Passienus, first cohort, praetorian guard. It falls to me to announce the death of the emperor.' He took a deep breath, praying Herminius and the others had not failed in their acclamation. 'Hail, Emperor Claudius.'

The legate's eyes widened as he took it in, finding refuge in the simple routine demanded of him. He repeated Italus' words and saluted stiffly, the action copied by his men.

'Stand at ease, centurion. The emperor was a young man. How did he die?'

It was a question that would be asked all the way from Syria to Gaul, Italus thought. There was only one answer.

'Assassins, unknown as I left. Emperor Claudius will strive to find those responsible, I do not doubt.'

'I see. It sounds like the praetorians failed in their only duty.'

'Legate?' Italus said, though he knew very well what he meant.

'They were the emperor's personal guard. The emperor is dead. Am I not being clear, centurion?'

Italus kept his face utterly blank. It was not surprising to have men of another legion taking pleasure in seeing praetorians tarnished. That news would delight officers of every legion of the empire. It seemed petty to one who could recall Caligula's blood on his hands. Italus smiled tightly, however, showing the discomfort the man wanted to see.

'Very clear, sir. I'm sure Emperor Claudius will satisfy himself as to the details.'

'Yes, I'm sure he will. Claudius, you say? Is that his uncle Claudius?'

That too was a reasonable question. The legate of the VI Ferrata may have been far from Rome, but he was clearly not a fool. Once again, Italus had to pray the senate had not struck down the praetorian choice. Given that they were the ones who had murdered him, it was not an impossible prospect. For all he knew, Rome could be in the midst of a civil war at that very moment.

'Claudius, sir, yes. Brother to Germanicus, who was commander to six legions.'

'I knew Germanicus, centurion. He was a noble Roman and a fine commander. Still, his younger brother Claudius . . . more a scholar than a general, wouldn't you say?'

The man was needling him and Italus was in no mood for it. He was on the legate's island and he had to show a certain amount of respect. The man could make his life difficult, but perhaps it was time to push back, just a little.

'I couldn't say, sir, no. I have orders from the new emperor. Unless you seek to delay me?'

'Let me see them,' the man said, holding out his hand.

Italus glared at him.

'Given the circumstances, they were not written. I am to

retrieve a prisoner – the emperor’s niece. I am to restore her to her place in Rome.’

‘I see. But you have no proof of that, is that what you are saying?’

Italus took a half-step closer. He was shorter than the prefect, but both wider and more used to sudden violence. Still, the man stood his ground.

‘Those orders are from the emperor himself,’ Italus said. ‘You have my oath as a centurion of the praetorians. I need no proof.’

The legate chewed his inner lip as he thought. Italus waited. There was really only one outcome. No legion officer would want to send for confirmation at such a time. Italus was a centurion in the emperor’s own guard. The VI Ferrata may have had command on Pontia, but the legate had to give way to that close association. Or put a centurion in irons, with his career as the stake. Italus knew all that and so did he.

‘Very well,’ the legate said at last. ‘I have horses and a mule for the prisoner.’

Italus accepted with grace, having won the struggle. Never fight a battle you’ve already won, that was what his old trainer always said. The legate would harbour a little spite, of course, but the legions were already envious of praetorians. The life in Rome was one they all desired, with the best of everything. It was a world away from some tiny island in the middle of nowhere.

Italus said nothing to the two legionaries sent as his escort. He rode slowly away from the docks, with the mule on a long rein. He wondered if it was the same animal that had carried Agrippina to her confinement. He felt himself smiling at the thought of seeing her again,

though it was tinged with nervousness. Four years was a long time to be in the dark. He still remembered Gemellus and the way he had stared at the stars. Italus shuddered.

He dismounted at the little prison set into the hill, tossing his reins to the legionaries as if that was their purpose. They glowered, but didn't dare to say anything. It might have been his rank or the fact that he was praetorian, Italus didn't know or care.

The same man he remembered came to the outer door. He looked neat enough, though his eyes were dark with what seemed like worry. Italus strode towards him. The soldier saw the cowed expressions of the legionaries. He sensed the threat in the approaching praetorian and held up empty hands.

'What's all this?' he asked, edging back so the doorway was all around him.

Italus either had to halt or knock him down. He was not quite ready to do that, though he breathed through his nose and kept his head lowered. The soldier he faced was slim, almost scrawny. Italus knew he could trample him like summer wheat if he had to.

'Orders from Rome,' he said. 'The prisoner is to be released.'

The man's mouth opened in silent surprise, but Italus heard a cry. With one hand, he shoved the gaoler back against the doorframe and went in.

Inside, Agrippina sat at a little table by the door. A lamp had been lit for her and he saw she was in the middle of eating. Her plate contained what looked like cuts of wild rabbit and green herbs. He blinked at her, overwhelmed and confused as she rose to her feet.

'I'm to go free?' she said, breathing hard.

Italus struggled to remember his duty.

'Your brother Gaius is dead, my lady. Your uncle is emperor.'

He could hear the tremble in his own voice. He had dreamed of this moment a thousand times. Now, it seemed to be rushing past. Questions bubbled up in him. How was she out of her cell?

'Uncle Claudius?' she said.

When he nodded, she leaned on the table, just breathing.

'I'm free to go, to leave this place?'

'On my word, you are,' he replied.

She left the little table and came to the door. Italus stepped with her, but before she could pass through, he reached out and shoved the gaoler back once again. This time, he pressed a knife to the man's throat.

'If this one harmed you, speak now, my lady.'

Agrrippina put a hand on his arm. He thought he could feel the coolness of it even through the cloth. Impossible, of course, but he dared not look down.

'He was kind to me, Italus. You saw my little table? Helvius lets me eat out here sometimes, in the evenings. He is a good man.'

Italus met the legionary's eyes and saw only fear. He nodded, sheathing his knife and stepping out into the night air. He had been ready to kill a soldier on duty. What that said was all too clear.

Italus waited like a statue while Agrrippina murmured to her prison guard, clearly saying goodbyes. They embraced briefly and she promised to send him wine and something else Italus could not catch. The poor fool was blushing like a boy.

Italus helped her onto the mule then, handing her the reins.

‘There is a galley waiting at the dock to take you home, Agrippina,’ he said.

It had been years since he’d last said that name aloud. He’d expected to find her in filth and darkness, as he remembered poor Gemellus. Instead, she looked much as she had on going in. She was twenty-six years old and more beautiful even than he remembered. The power of that beauty was extraordinary and he had to clench his jaw to look away. Her eyes were closed as she settled herself for the ride down. Italus longed to embrace her and yet she sat aloof and quiet, just breathing the night’s free air.

‘Thank you for coming for me,’ she said.

16

The voices of the crowd rose in exultation as the new emperor rode through the city. Claudius was flanked by praetorians, all six thousand of them marching fore and back, passing hour upon hour as the crowds swelled and cheered. If anyone noted that they might have escorted a prisoner in the same way, it was not said aloud.

Claudius wore a golden laurel wreath, an imperial crown. Once, Julius Caesar had earned the honour for personal courage. Recreating those leaves in gold was a more permanent mark of the gods' favour. Claudius smiled as he rode, raising his hand to acknowledge the citizens of Rome. In turn, they threw green fronds onto the road and chanted his name.

The joy was real, after so long in the dark. The reign of Caligula had spread rage and terror like varnish across the city, holding them all still. His spies and informants had condemned entire families to be burned, taken from their homes and scourged while mobs bayed and looted their shelves for food. No one had been safe, not in the legions,

not in the slums, not the innocent wives and daughters of the nobilitas. The crowds at the Circus Maximus had witnessed impalements and seen even senators crucified. Each month had brought something worse, the sheer numbers appalling. The reign of a madman had swelled like an abscess over the city, or like the pressure before a storm, where there was threat in every breath. It had been, simply, too much to bear. There was always blood on the Gemonian steps then, splashed red over darker browns.

Emperor Claudius was the knife that had released the poison, the rebirth of hope. The praetorians had acclaimed him, and if there were rumours about their part in the death of Caligula, they remained just that. His second wife had gashed her wrists when she heard, the knife still in her hand. The praetorians had found her. It was just one more tragedy for the city to bear – and put behind.

In his first act as emperor, Claudius had pardoned the entire regiment for crimes past – without saying what they had been. The word ‘amnesty’ meant a forgetting – and this was a new day, a new year. The people left tools and shops and workbenches to come and see a moment in history they might never know again. Some of them had even headed in the night before, securing good spots before the crowds became too deep. Children and women were there amongst them; food and drink were sold and the mood was giddy, light enough for laughter. When one of the praetorian mounts spooked and tried to go the wrong way, the rider was the only one not grinning and calling advice.

The great parade crossed the city east to west, taking in the poorest sections as well as the fine houses on the hills. It ended at the Palatine and Claudius dismounted there, waiting for his young wife to arrive.

Messalina was further back, resting on a carriage seat with her daughter, Octavia. Mother and child were protected by praetorians on all sides, bristling at anyone in the crowd who dared step onto the road. She was the wife of the emperor, after all. More, there was a curve to her womb that meant she might carry a male heir. With Claudius riding ahead, Messalina was the imperial family.

She wore a dress of golden weave with blue jewels at her throat. Cleopatra had worn them once, so Claudius had murmured that morning as he attached the clasp, breathing through his nose. Messalina touched the jewels often and unconsciously, overwhelmed by the change in her fortunes. Just a month before, she and her husband had lived in constant fear of what Caligula might do. She had woken each morning with an aching jaw from the way she clenched her teeth in her sleep, but there had been no way out. Until, like a miracle written in a patch of blood, there was.

As gates closed behind them, the sound of the crowd was muted at last. Messalina was helped down by one of the praetorians, the burly officer nodding sweetly to her as she stepped into an embrace with her husband. Claudius blushed to be kissed before those soldiers, but he nodded to his wife and daughter, pleased to see them happy. Octavia was only three and dressed in a tiny replica of a white stola robe, hemmed in gold. Her hair was bound in a twin plait close to her head. She looked around her in awe, nodding to the soldiers.

‘I have s-so many plans,’ Claudius said softly, for Messalina’s ear alone. For once, his stammer was hardly in evidence.

Messalina took Octavia’s little hand and put her free

arm in her husband's, letting Claudius lead them both into the great hall of the imperial estate. In normal days, the emperor would summon legion legates, senators or consuls there. It had the shadow of Caligula on it still, the smell of him on the air. Messalina shuddered, telling herself again and again that he was gone. Her husband was emperor and all the duties and responsibilities were his.

On that day of his ascension – and once a year on the anniversary – a right of petition was exercised. A line had formed along the edge of the hall in anticipation and Messalina could feel eyes on the new imperial family as they swept through. Some of them would be those who had suffered under the previous emperor, of course. Most, though, would be relatives and close friends of the senate and the staff of the Palatine. At a glance, it looked like an opportunity for the downtrodden of Rome to seek justice, but the truth was subtler. To get a place in that line meant favours had been asked or repaid. It meant they were part of the gilded class themselves, the ten thousand who ruled in Rome, no matter which emperor sat the throne. Still, they had to petition, Messalina thought. Only Claudius had the power to grant or deny.

She watched as her husband took his seat on a chair of gold and iron at the end of the hall. Servants guided their daughter away to be fed and to sleep. Octavia was already yawning after all the excitement and she did not protest. Messalina watched as her husband had to hitch himself up to sit the throne. He looked like a schoolboy sitting at the adult table for the first time. Messalina frowned at that. It would have to be remade to suit his smaller frame. Her husband had to feel virile when he sat there, not overmatched by those gone before.

She took her place at his side, choosing to stand for a time, to savour the extraordinary moment. Perhaps too, Messalina wanted to remind those present that she was pregnant once again. She cradled the swelling of her womb with one hand.

Her own chair was smaller still and less ornate. Caligula had never allowed his wives or lovers to sit on his right side. Messalina's seat had been fashioned in a jeweller's on the Quirinal hill, made of oak and padded cloth as well as winding leaves of jade and gold. And why not? She was wife to the emperor! Poor Claudius, who had once been kicked across that room, now had the power of life and death over everyone in it. The wheel turned – some rose and some fell, whether they deserved it or not. To stand at the very top was something she had only dreamed.

Messalina waited through the endless congratulations and personal oaths. She noted the names of those who had been cruel to her husband. Men like the chief priest of Jupiter, who looked clammy and pale as he knelt. Messalina smiled at him, showing her teeth. Let bastards like him wait for the axe to fall. It would come – and be all the sweeter in its justice.

She found she was pressing her hands together over her womb, like a little girl waiting for presents. The day had begun in darkness, but when the sun rose, the crowds had cheered and waved to her, showing love in a way she could still hardly believe. Her husband was emperor! The words never failed to astonish. Claudius had already given her a daughter. If he had managed to put a son in her belly, she would be mother to a line stretching to the end of the world. Out of the darkness, dawn had come. She was free. It was giddy, as if she had drunk a cup of wine.

She took her seat when the oath-taking wearied her. There were *thousands* of officials in Rome, from the vigiles to officers of the praetorians, the heads of trade guilds, the commanders of legions, the administrators of bridges, aqueducts and public baths! They were all there in best robes and uniforms, while her attention wandered. It had taken time and organisation to bring them to Rome on the same day, but it worked, perfectly. They stepped up in threes or fours, names and ranks ringing out from imperial heralds on either side. They made an oath of loyalty to the emperor and his heirs, to carry out their duties on pain of death and disgrace, to uphold the honour of the gods and support the city in all her endeavours. Then they stepped back to allow another group to approach.

Claudius began to squirm and sigh as the hours wore on. The light changed its angle as the sun moved, so that Messalina found her attention drawn to its passage across the patterns of a floor mosaic. It was never so fast that she could see it move and yet . . . it moved even so. The gods watched all they did, she thought, sending light and life. Still, she felt her back begin to ache and her bladder grow uncomfortable. No pregnant woman could sit so long. Didn't the men realise? How much longer was she expected to endure? Her husband was fifty-one years old, after all. She was only twenty – and still felt she'd been there since the beginning of time.

The petitioners had waited even longer, of course, denied the chance to sit. They endured in patient silence while the oaths went on and on, the long day enlivened only when one fainted and was dragged out. Messalina wondered if those would be returned to the line, or

whether that moment of weakness had cost them the single chance. She suspected the latter . . .

Her thoughts drew to a stop, like ice forming. The oaths had ended. The humble line of petition had been summoned at last, men and women approaching the emperor on stiff legs. Messalina leaned forward in her chair. She *knew* the woman who was third in that line. The ones ahead were strangers, men dressed in simple clothes. The first of those bowed as he presented some wrong only the new emperor could undo.

The child kicked in her womb as Messalina stared. Julia Agrippina, young widow, niece to the emperor . . . Messalina felt cold ripple across her skin . . . at that moment, mother to the only heir. Messalina found she was rubbing the tips of her fingers over the bulge in her dress. She prayed for the thousandth time that she carried a son. The gods had given her so much, had pulled her up from despair and humiliation. She had guided her husband through a court that almost destroyed them both – and she had triumphed. It would not be too much to ask for a boy to carry on that line.

The first petitioner presented his case simply and well. Claudius was interested in such things and listened intently. He ruled on it then and there, as a symbol of his new authority. The emperor's ruling was final, backed by the power of the law. That man went away with tears of joy streaming down his face.

The second was some complex case of monies in default to a temple. Messalina rolled her eyes at that. Even an emperor would not wish to offend the gods. She was not surprised when Claudius deferred his judgement to a later date, promising a ruling by the Kalends of the following

month. The petitioner was clearly crestfallen, but he could only kneel and thank Claudius for his wisdom.

Messalina watched as the woman stepped forward. Agrippina was achingly beautiful, she realised. She even moved well, with a spring in her step that suggested strength. The emperor's niece was clear-skinned, with long, dark hair bound in gold thread. Despite the labours of her slaves that morning, Messalina felt both ugly and fat in comparison. Her womb seemed less a golden promise in that moment and more a melon strapped to her.

Before Agrippina could begin the ritual of petition, Claudius spoke, making his wife turn sharply.

'I am pleased to see you returned to us, niece,' he said. A ripple of interest spread across the hall as those who knew whispered to those who did not. 'I feared your time in exile would have been hard on you. I believe you were wronged, Agrippina.' He waved a hand to one of the scribes copying his words. 'Let that judgement stand in the imperial record. I would have done something about it before, but I was n-not . . . in a position to do so. I sent Centurion Italus to b-bring you home as soon as I could.'

As Messalina stared through narrowed eyes, Agrippina dropped slowly to one knee, in perfect balance the whole way down and back up. It seemed every man present was watching her.

'I am more grateful than you will ever know, uncle – no, *Emperor* Claudius!'

She said the last with a grin, and half the crowd mirrored her pleasure, lifted by it.

'I am still getting used to all this myself,' Claudius replied, causing a chuckle to roll through the crowd. 'I think, for a n-niece, "uncle" will suit.'

The mood had lightened and yet Messalina saw Agrippina frown. Claudius too leaned forward.

‘Your p-petition, my dear! You have waited all day with the others. That was a fine act, Agrippina. You m-must know I would have agreed to see you.’

‘You honour me, uncle. I have known such dark times, it is hard to trust . . . I will not speak of them, not now. I have always been loyal. You know I lost my husband . . . On false accusation, my son was also taken from me, as well as the Ahenobarbus estate. Through your mercy and grace, I have come home to right those wrongs. It is for that reason I came to petition here today, in trust and hope that I would see my son’s inheritance restored.’

Messalina leaned over, close enough to murmur into her husband’s ear. Claudius was too trusting, especially when it came to women. He needed to be protected from his own generosity. Messalina didn’t like the way this one had made herself the most interesting thing to have happened that day. Claudius was emperor! That was all that mattered.

She thought quickly as her husband bent to hear. Messalina too had been at the heart of Caligula’s court. She too had survived it.

‘The Ahenobarbus estate was vast,’ she whispered. ‘Half those farms are in other hands now, bought legally from the state. There will be trouble from this. Perhaps you should defer it for later judgement.’

Claudius looked unhappy, so Messalina reached further, close enough for her lips to touch his ear. For emphasis, she tapped him on the forearm. She did that whenever she wanted something from him.

‘Isn’t her son still the heir, husband? Are you sure you

want to restore your niece to wealth and power before you have a son of your own?’

Claudius winced as he looked back at Agrippina, not wanting to hurt her.

‘I will defer my judgement on your petition to the Ides of next month. That will give my clerks time to assess what remains of the Ahenobarbus estate. You should be aware that it is much reduced.’

He smiled at his own cleverness then, glancing at Messalina to catch her approval. She stared back, wary of any innovation he might bring to the matter.

Agrippina’s expression tightened subtly, her eyes seeming to darken. She and Messalina looked at one another and something hostile passed between them. Claudius blinked slowly.

‘I will do what I can,’ he said, uncertainly.

Agrippina was still watching the little smile that had come to Messalina’s face, understanding only too well what had happened. She dropped to one knee again, not trusting herself to speak as she turned, letting the next petitioner come to the front.

Agrippina walked through the city, seething at the way her uncle had treated her in front of the entire noble class of Rome. There were a dozen terms for men who were ruled by their wives. She muttered the crudest ones under her breath at intervals, as if they rose from deep within and burst at her lips.

‘Where now?’ she said to the one walking with her, gesturing at a crossroads. Even that was not a fair description in that part of the city. The roads were narrow and she thought she had trodden in something so foul she did not

want to look. Not when she could not burn the shoes! Agrippina had nothing but the dress she wore and a single pair of sandals.

Other petitioners had left with lands restored, with law cases found in their favour, while her uncle's simpering whore had denied her Barbo's estate with just a whisper. And to prove what? That Messalina had Claudius' little cock in her hand? All Agrippina wanted was justice, after everything she had suffered. She wanted to rest and sleep for a week in her old home, not have to take up arms against some foolish girl! It was enough to make her want to scream.

'Yes . . . take the left path,' Italus said, his brow creased in thought.

The praetorian had volunteered to escort her through the more dangerous parts of the city. In truth, Agrippina was grateful to him. If he hadn't seen her frustration and made the offer, she honestly didn't know what she would have done. The streets were not safe for a young woman in the day, not without some sort of accompaniment. The massive shoulders of a praetorian in uniform would deter gangs or thieves, she was sure. Despite his lack of height, Italus had the look of a difficult man to knock down.

'Thank you,' she said, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice.

No one had told her where her son was being held. The clerks of the petitioners' hall had no interest in hearing her request after seeing the emperor. They'd waved her off and it had felt like a great pit opening. She didn't know the maze of streets in that quarter – after years in the cells, she wasn't sure if her husband's sister was even alive. How could she find her son?

Agrippina had been shaking as she'd explained all that to Italus, asking him again to come to her rescue. He hadn't abandoned her, thank the gods. She glanced at him as he walked, seeing his constant scrutiny of the passing crowd. He sensed her gaze and smiled. She looked away. Did she feel something for him? Or was it just that he had come for her, to the cells at Pontia? He had kept his word and taken her out. She thought of her own desperation and current poverty. It meant she had to live at the whim of others. That was the point of wealth, she realised. Perhaps it was only when she had nothing that it became clear. It meant her days were her own. It meant she could sit in silence or walk away – and that she had the choice. The wealth she had known as a child, the Ahenobarbus fortune she had married, with its horses and land . . . that had been freedom. Italus seemed to be a habit she could not break, but perhaps it was just fear that drew her to him.

The praetorian increased his pace as he reached the legion barracks near the eastern wall. The area was rough and cheap and his instinct was to hurry Agrippina through. She saw pork haunches being sold with a legion stamp still just visible, though someone had gashed the skin to obscure its origin. The people there stood back for a praetorian, but they also called insults after them. The mood in that place was unwelcoming, even violent. Agrippina was soon hopelessly lost, taken down turn after turn until she began to wonder if he too had lost his way, or had decided to kidnap her.

'Is it close?' she said.

Italus glanced over.

'That road there,' he said. 'I've been past a few times, whenever I could. I kept an eye on him, just as I said I would.'

‘And he’s well? He is healthy?’

‘Four years old and already built like a little fighter,’ he said. ‘Like the son of a charioteer, yes. He’s not one of those skinny boys, my lady. No, he’ll be a boxer and a horseman – a legionary even.’

He saw her frown as they turned into the road. The narrow houses looked cheerful enough, at least if he ignored the dead dog, cut in half by some cart’s wheel. It was not the most romantic spot in Rome, that was the truth of it. He turned to her even so.

‘Agrippina, before you go in . . . I swore to myself I’d ask, if the chance came.’ He couldn’t quite take a breath, his voice choking as she looked at him in concern. ‘I am a man of means, Agrippina. I have family land and my pay as centurion, with seniority. I am free and if you would have me, I would be honoured to make you my wife – and to adopt your son, of course. If you . . . might perhaps be willing.’

In that moment, he was more vulnerable, more afraid than he could ever remember. He saw she was staring at him, head and neck bent like a bird as she understood what he was asking. She would scorn the offer, that went without saying. She would laugh at him and break his heart. What could a woman like that want with an old bastard like him? He was almost twice her age and she would have the pick of senate sons . . .

‘You want to marry me?’ she said. ‘Are you sure?’

All words had deserted him and he just nodded.

‘Then I accept,’ she said. ‘Yes, Italus. Though you should know, I’m not an easy woman to love.’

‘Yes you are,’ he said. ‘You are, I swear it.’

He reached in and crushed her to him, surprising them

both. Agrippina felt his arms around her, his lips on hers. She was safe with him. The fear she felt, of poverty, of being alone: the great gaping edge of the pit receded just a little. That was something, when she had nothing else.

Italus thumped on the door, beaming at the beauty who had agreed to be his wife. Agrippina found herself blushing. There was a certain physical excitement to the thought of those arms around her. She cared nothing for the grunting thing Barbo had wanted to do so many times. She could endure that once again, she was certain. More importantly, though, her uncle's new wife might see her as less of a threat if she was safely married. That might be the difference between safety and having to run.

The door opened and she turned to see a strange man with eyes painted like an image of Cleopatra.

'Yes?' he said. His gaze fell on the praetorian, still grinning to himself in the street. 'You again? I told you, the boy is fed and looked after. I . . .' The man's glance shot back to Agrippina and grew thoughtful.

'I am his mother,' Agrippina said. They were words she had whispered a thousand times as she'd drifted to sleep on Pontia. She had yearned for that moment for longer than she could bear to recall. 'Where is he? Is he here?'

The painted man looked back over his shoulder.

'Domitia! Lucius! The boy's mother is here.'

He looked again at the extraordinary beauty standing on the street, her hands opening and closing like flowers at her side.

'Come in, then. It's not much, but it's clean. Mostly clean, anyway.'

Agrippina was past him before he had finished speaking. Remi gave way before the praetorian and the door

closed, shutting out the street and the rest of the city. Agrippina saw a little boy come running. They looked at one another in stillness, finding memories they had both lost. Then she gathered him in, weeping tears of joy.

The older woman had soot-stained fingers from whatever work she had been doing in the back. She wiped her forehead as Agrippina hugged her son, leaving a smear. Agrippina didn't see the way Domitia Lepida's other hand clutched the air, reaching for a boy who was suddenly not hers. Remi did, however. He felt the pain she tried to hide. The presence of the boy's mother meant something new in their lives, without a doubt. It also meant an ending.

I 7

Italus watched his wife play with her son. Agrippina sat with legs apart to make a space on the flagstones, sitting across from Lucius. Not *his* son, Italus reminded himself, not *their* son. She had resisted Lucius being formally adopted. There had been furious arguments about that in the first weeks of the marriage. Until he'd seen she was enjoying his anger. It was as if she knew how to react to rage, so brought it about – choosing the familiar over the strange. He'd wondered a thousand times about her marriage to Barbo then, but she would not talk about him. What few scraps Italus had learned had been in stories he'd heard her tell Lucius about his father.

The house they shared was on the Quirinal hill, protected from the street by a high wall and stone posts. The gate into the gardens was set with bronze and iron, solid as any strongroom. More, it was answered by his staff if anyone hailed the house. In response to that fortress and safe haven, Agrippina found the slightest excuse to go out,

sometimes just to stand in the street and breathe. She had been a prisoner for a long time.

She did not talk about her years in the cell on Pontia, either. Italus had asked half a dozen times how it was he'd left her in darkness and yet found her sitting near the outer door. Her dress had been clean, he remembered, her hair brushed. She'd had almost four years to gain the trust of the guard, but Italus still itched to know the story behind it.

She was not the young woman he had taken out to exile, that much had become clear. There were times when she looked straight through him, as if he didn't exist at all, or her thoughts were so far away Italus had ceased to matter.

The marriage had been a brief service at the temple of Juno on the Capitoline. He had kept the exchange of vows as simple and short as possible, still hardly able to believe she would not vanish like dawn frost. That evening, he had untied her wedding belt in his room, revealing her. He had reached to snuff the lamp and she had moved with sudden speed, holding his arm.

'I cannot . . .?' She had shuddered, the first weakness he'd seen in her since her return. 'I need light, Italus. Always one lamp lit, until the sun rises. If that is all right.'

'Of course!' he'd said to her.

It had been a little strange to make love with the lamp gilding them both. It had left him with memories that burned. She'd kept her eyes open, he recalled, watching him. He had been gentle, slow, waiting for her to make the soft cry he remembered from his first wife. It never came, but she'd seemed happy enough the following day, singing to herself as she organised her new household and washed Lucius' hair.

Italus saw her flip coloured tiles with a cry, some sort of challenge. Lucius pointed out pairs with narrow-eyed focus, one after the other, asking for them to be revealed. The little boy had no memory of his mother before the exile. In fact, he'd wailed at being taken away from his aunt and her lodgers.

Italus had been forced to whip him to make a point and stop him fighting his way free. It had been a dispiriting experience, like beating a rug for dust. Lucius was surprisingly strong and they could hardly carry a wriggling, struggling child of four right across the city. Yet it did not feel as if they'd broken his will, just that he'd decided to go along with them and see what they would do next. Italus had felt Lucius staring, marking him for future action in the manner of an enemy. The centurion had grinned at him. He was a brave one! Barbo's son . . . but not his. He frowned. Adoption was common in Rome, in all classes. New names were taken and children treated as if they were the same blood. Italus didn't understand why Agrippina would resist Lucius taking his name, but there it was, like an open wound between them.

He cleared his throat as he stepped out from the porch. Lucius looked round in surprise, but he had the impression Agrippina had known he was there. She didn't miss much in that place. In the first days after the marriage, she'd examined every part of it, judging his wealth in comparison to what she'd known before. He'd never looked at his family home through the eyes of another. He'd always thought the house was in a perfect position, deep enough to keep the dust of the street away, safe and secure. He was not sure she felt the same.

'I have to report in,' he said by way of greeting.

Emperor Claudius was holding some ceremony to consecrate a new priest of Jupiter. The last one had killed himself, so it was said. Italus suspected it was in a similar manner to Caligula's last wife. Sometimes, the shame was too great to keep the knife steady. They needed help then, the way he'd heard it. Claudius may not have been another Caligula, but the little scholar still had a sting.

Agrippina looked up and there was a moment when Italus wondered if she even knew him, so cold was her expression. Then she smiled and he forgot all his misgivings about her. She was elegant: more slender and far more beautiful than his first wife. Men turned in the street as she passed and she seemed unaware of their attention. Italus knew she had been married very young to Barbo and perhaps she had just been a skinny thing then. The woman she had become was finer than he had any right to expect in his bed. His friends in the praetorians had learned not to make ribald comments about it. Italus reacted badly to any jokes at his expense, or hers.

'I am heading to the Palatine myself,' she said. Italus made a tutting sound and her expression tightened. 'I told you I would go. It is the Ides, the fifteenth day. Uncle Claudius promised me a ruling on Lucius' inheritance. Should I pretend it doesn't matter?'

'You won't be able to see the emperor,' he reminded her gently. 'He hardly sleeps these days, he has so many tasks before him. At best, you will wait all day in some empty room for some clerk to bring you the emperor's ruling – if it has even crossed his desk yet. I could check on the petition while I'm on duty, then send the news to you just as easily.'

'Really? Am I a prisoner then, Italus? I know that state very well. I believe I recognise it when it appears before me.'

‘Don’t be dramatic,’ he snapped. He coloured as her eyes widened, gentling his tone and holding out an open palm as a symbol of peace. ‘You are not a prisoner, Agrippina, as you know very well. All I have is yours. You command my servants.’

‘Your servants?’

‘Our servants,’ he corrected, too late.

She stood with a grace he could have watched all day, rising like a curl of smoke. Lucius remained on the ground with the coloured tiles, watching. He never cried, Italus thought. The boy certainly grew angry, but he didn’t snivel or weep like other children.

‘Your servants have waited on you for years,’ Agrippina said. ‘They served your first wife in this very house. If a disagreement arose between us, do you think they would take your side or mine?’

‘We are husband and wife . . .’ he began. By Mars, his first wife had never made him so angry, not that he recalled. This one drew blood. Had he ever known Agrippina? He was beginning to think he had not. Perhaps her beauty had dazzled him like the sun.

‘The servants would obey you,’ she went on, ‘from long habit and the law. The law supports you, Italus, as my husband and master. If you choose to divorce me, I would be back on the street within the hour, perhaps to stay with Domitia Lepida in the eaves.’

Lucius rose to his feet at that, tugging at her sleeve to interrupt the storm brewing between them.

‘Why would . . .’ Italus looked at her in disbelief. ‘Why would you plan for divorce? Woman, we haven’t been married a month!’

Agrippina put her hand on his arm, tapping him with

her palm. It was an odd gesture, quite familiar in a way he could not place. He felt himself calming.

‘I am not *planning* for divorce, Italus. You are my husband and I am quite happy here. Yet the Ahenobarbus estate is mine. If I can have it returned, I can thank Domitia Lepida as she actually deserves, for looking after Lucius. I can . . . The point is that I can do whatever I want, with that inheritance! Lucius will certainly be safer. I will be free.’

‘You are free now,’ Italus pointed out, irritated with her stubbornness.

‘At your whim.’

‘The whim of your adored husband,’ he repeated, trying to make her smile. She looked at him in scorn and he felt anger rising once again.

‘Fine. Go to your uncle. I hope he rules in your favour, Agrippina, I really do. Perhaps when you feel free, you will be able to see – to trust – those who truly love you.’

He strode to the gate and it was opened for him as he approached, revealing the quiet street beyond. Agrippina watched him go, her expression thoughtful.

‘Would you like to come to the Palatine with me?’ she asked her son.

Lucius nodded, a little warily.

‘Will Domitia be there?’ he asked. His was a childish voice, but there was a strength of will, growing all the time. Lucius had not forgotten his father’s sister, nor Remi and Simeon, whoever they were. He asked about them every day, until Agrippina wanted to slap him.

‘Who knows?’ she said brightly. ‘Perhaps your great-uncle will be, though. Emperor Claudius is the one I want to see. He has what is mine.’

She could not remain in the house that day, not when Claudius had promised her a ruling. Italus just wanted a quiet life, which was not so strange for one who had seen all he had. She scowled after him then. He hadn't wanted to talk about the emperor's death either, preferring to leave it all in the past. Agrippina had tried to speak to a dozen men and women who'd been in the Palatine that night. None of them would talk about it.

She looked again at her son.

'How is it that your feet are bare? Fetch your sandals, Lucius! Honestly, would you risk the sharp stones of the roads without protection? Go.'

He scampered off, pleased at the smile she gave him.

Agrippina thought of her poor, doomed brothers and sisters as she waited. Nero and Drusus were gone. Gaius had been murdered. Her sisters Drusilla and Livilla had both passed from the world, taken by fevers. She was the only one left of all her parents' children. It was an odd thing to realise and it brought a wave of loneliness that surprised her. Agrippina whispered a prayer for them, or to them, she was not sure. She hoped they heard. She would carry them all with her if she had to, as her strength.

'*There* you are,' she said as Lucius returned, skidding to a stop and striking a pose to make her laugh. He was strong and healthy, the last of a line that stretched back to Julius Caesar himself.

She turned at the thought, as if she could look through the walls and across to the Palatine. Her uncle's wife was in the final days and weeks of pregnancy over there. Guarded night and day like some precious treasure. If Messalina had a son, he would be heir to the world . . . and Lucius would have nothing.

‘We can’t have that,’ she said aloud.

Her son looked at her quizzically. His mother spoke to herself sometimes. It was a habit he was used to.

‘Can’t have what?’ he said.

She blinked at him.

‘Did I say it aloud? I meant we can’t have you bruising those little feet on the road.’

He snorted, kicking the stone flags. Agrippina gestured for the gate servant to open up. Italus employed a burly Thracian for the task. The man would also accompany mother and son to the Palatine, keeping them safe from thieves and clutching hands.

As she went out into the street, she prayed to the gods her petition would be answered. Prayer had been her comfort in the darkness. In fact, her whispering had been what first brought the gaoler to her, a very devout man. She had knelt with him day after day in the darkness, learning ancient chants and prayers that asked for forgiveness and mercy. She could repeat them all without the slightest effort.

She had talked to that man for months before he trusted her. He had been a decent, simple legionary in a forgotten post and without female company. After a year, he had brought her the lamp she craved, making her swear she would hide it if anyone ever came. In the second year, he had accepted she was no threat to him, but a woman of faith. She remembered the click of the cell-door lock with extraordinary clarity. At times, she thought her life was before that sound – and after it. He had let her roam free within the cells, as long as she never stepped out into the open air.

She still thought of him, sometimes. He had not asked

her to ease him and he had never been cruel. She had done it even so, as a gift, freely given. Few men were as kind, at least in her experience. She still remembered the terror in his face as Italus had pressed a knife to his throat. He'd feared Agrippina would say he had lain with her, but what was that, in comparison to being out of her cell?

The strange thing was, she still dreamed of that black hole, still feared she had not left it. She looked the same, she knew that. Yet she was no longer the woman she had been. She had cracked in that endless night. She had fallen into jagged little pieces on that cell floor. Sometimes, she thought she could still feel one in her chest, lodged under the bone. Then she wondered if she had found them all, or if part of her would always remain on Pontia, lost in the dark.

Agrippina walked her son along a cloister she remembered from years before, almost as a dream of another life. On that visit to the Palatine, Tiberius had been emperor and her brother Gaius had been his heir, a damaged young man with a chance at hope and life and love. Agrippina had seen all of that dashed by the death of his wife and son. A reign that had begun so well had turned like souring milk.

Her name alone swept her through the first guard-posts. The praetorians all knew her as the wife of a prominent centurion. Yet she was also the niece of the emperor and, with enough confidence, that carried her deep into the imperial precinct. Clerks who would have turned away a senator could not be sure the emperor had not sent for her. Of course, if Claudius heard how she used his name, it would lead to a reckoning, but that

would be on another day. On the Ides of that month, she had brought her son to hear the judgement for which she had petitioned. The emperor's promise had been written into the official record and that too could be checked. As it had to be, to grant her access to the personal scribes of the emperor's own staff.

Outside, the sun crept across the sky of the city and she had to wait as block after block gave way before her. Step by slow step, with Lucius growing restive and hungry at her side, she passed through rings of protection around her uncle. She would not tell Italus he had been right to warn against this course of action, but she'd come to appreciate the seriousness of it. Nor was there any way back that would not raise at least as much suspicion as she had sought to avoid in the first place.

She was beginning to regret bringing Lucius. Agrippina had thought his presence might be a bargaining piece with her uncle, or some advantage. The reality was spending an entire day with a fractious little boy. She'd had to apologise for him more than once and beg food from a passing slave so that he would stop asking.

The senior scribe left her at a door where two praetorians stood in full armour. She saw their eyes turn to her when they thought she would not notice, but they remained silent. Agrippina sighed and yawned as she took a seat, showing herself in the light from a narrow window along the wall. The day was ending and she knew her eyes turned gold in sunlight. It was a striking effect and the closest praetorian could not resist speaking.

'My regards to your husband, domina,' he said. 'Tell him Herminius kept you safe, if you wouldn't mind.'

He smiled and she mirrored it. It might be hours more

before she had her answer. The scribe had only shrugged when she'd pressed him, as if it was all anyone ever did. Lucius was running up and down the corridor outside, lost in some imaginary chariot race. She stood from the seat by the window and touched the guard on the hand.

'You know Italus, Herminius?'

'We're both first cohort, domina. Different century, but it's . . .' He realised she might not know the details of praetorian ranks and chuckled. 'We're friends, anyway.'

Agrippina nodded, standing a little too close. She'd found she could make women and some men retreat when she did that, growing flushed as they did so. Herminius, though, had his back to a door. He stared at her.

'Italus told me about that night, that terrible night,' she murmured.

His eyes flickered to his left and she understood. She turned to the second guard.

'Would you look after my son? My uncle, Emperor Claudius, will be out in a moment. I don't want him to have gone too far.'

She spoke with perfect confidence, as if the thought of him refusing never even occurred to her. Yet it took Herminius gesturing for the pressure to become unbearable. The praetorian nodded sharply and strode away to wherever Lucius had gone to.

'I take it he wasn't there,' Agrippina said.

Herminius blew air from puffed cheeks, remembering.

'It was only a few of us. That was a dark night, domina. I hope to never see another like it.'

'It's in the past . . .' she said, her thoughts racing. 'Italus says he had nightmares for a while.'

'I did myself,' the big man replied in surprise. 'I think it

was all the blood. I've seen my share of fighting, domina, when the other . . . man is trying to kill you. That night was different. He was your brother, domina. If you say it was right, I'll accept that.'

For an instant, she felt the sunlight reach her eyes. They could gleam gold and still hide her thoughts from him. She could hear Lucius complaining as he was dragged back, closer every step. She took a guess and spoke.

'Italus struck a blow,' she said, 'just like the others. It had to be done.'

The big man seemed to slump slightly.

'Thank you, domina. It is like a balm to hear that from you.'

She stared at his confirmation, a little too long, so that a crease appeared between his eyes.

'Is everything all right, domina?'

Lucius made his appearance then, red-faced under his tan, struggling against the fist that gathered his tunic at the neck and dragged him in.

'Lucius!' Agrippina snapped. 'Stop that! I told him to fetch you! Now, you'll sit on that step and say not another word – *not another word!* – until I say you can. Understand? Or I will have your backside striped. Don't test me, Lucius.'

Her son sat down in furious silence, glaring at the stone floor, determined to deny her any response at all. Agrippina touched the praetorian on the arm, still soaking in what she had heard.

The double doors opened and Agrippina turned as both praetorians stood back. Her smile faded as she recognised the scribe who had brought her to that place. There were a dozen different routes back and forth in the imperial estate. Perhaps he had even gone into the

emperor's presence himself to announce her. He did not seem pleased, however.

'I'm afraid the emperor will not be able to see you today,' he said. To her horror, he began to turn back.

'I was told he would answer my petition on the Ides of this month,' Agrippina said quickly, words tumbling. 'Claudius said I should come to him this day!'

The man looked as if he had sucked something unpleasant as he paused and looked back.

'Circumstances have changed . . . The emperor's wife is confined, in labour. Do you understand? I shouldn't have said that much.'

He saw how stunned she was, how crushed. He dealt with dozens of men and women every day, all demanding or pleading for the emperor's time. It was his job to snuff them all like candles and not bother the man who actually ran the empire. Yet this one *was* Claudius' niece, sister to Caligula . . . It was a tricky little set of scales as he considered it. He took a deep breath.

'Come back in two months, on the Ides. I'll have an answer for you then.'

Agrippina faced defeat.

'If I write to my uncle . . .' she began.

The man was about to reply when a woman rushed up from behind him. She was young, with a smear of blood on her dress. She carried a huge jug in both hands, empty but still heavy.

'Out of the way,' she called ahead.

Both the scribe and Agrippina stepped aside.

'What news?' Agrippina said.

The scribe began to speak in outrage, but the young

woman called an answer over her shoulder, already running past.

‘It is a boy,’ she shouted. ‘The emperor has a son.’

‘*That* is not for public ears,’ the scribe called after her, glaring at Agrippina. ‘I’ll thank you not to repeat it until the official announcement is made.’

She hardly heard him. Agrippina was watching her son, looking around him in all the confusion of voices. Lucius had been the heir to Rome, to the whole world. In that moment, it was all ashes.

She heard a voice she knew then, that made her look past the scribe. The man stepped across as if he wanted to prevent even a glimpse into the imperial rooms.

The figure who came into view was Claudius himself, followed by a tail of clerks all busy with their slates and scrolls. He was still issuing orders and commands, requisitions and instructions from the emperor’s own office. Yet there was a bounce in his gait and a smile quirked the side of his mouth – his joy made visible. He had a son and heir, at last.

‘Congratulations, uncle!’ Agrippina called as loudly as she could.

Claudius hitched a step and looked around. He brightened as he saw her standing there, changing direction and coming over. His chief scribe stood back in respectful silence, making a pillar of himself in the emperor’s presence.

‘Agrippina! The news travels quickly! A son, my dear.’

There was no trace of his stammer, Agrippina noticed. The man’s happiness smoothed away the tics of his normal speech. He beamed at her and when she opened her arms, he embraced her. She held on, tightly.

‘I’m so pleased, uncle. I only came in to learn if I might have my husband’s estate returned – Lucius’ inheritance. To hear such news! It is wonderful.’

He was nodding at that.

‘Of course,’ he said.

Even then, she saw him consider it. The verdict was with her, however. She held her breath as he turned to the scribe.

‘Have the Ahenobarbus estate returned to my niece,’ Claudius ordered. ‘As a gesture of goodwill on this glorious day. A son, Agrippina! I feared I was too old to sire another child on Messalina. I have named him “Tiberius Claudius Caesar Germanicus”. He will see a world so far ahead I can hardly imagine it! Long after I am gone. Though perhaps I can leave him a greater empire than it was, no? Perhaps he’ll th-thank m-my memory.’ Claudius frowned as he heard his stammer return. The joy was fading and his old patterns came back like aching joints, forgotten for a time but still there.

‘Thank you, Majesty,’ she said.

Claudius leaned to kiss her and she reached up to touch his face as he did so, tapping him lightly on his cheek. He nodded to her and swept away then, his staff following like scratching hens.

The look Agrippina turned on the remaining scribe made him blush, but not in pleasure.

‘Run then!’ she said. ‘Your master has commanded you. Seal and sign deeds for all my brother Gaius took from me. I will do the rest.’

The man vanished at a speedy trot and she smiled with vast relief. With the deeds of the estate, she could go to any moneylender. With funds, she could hire guards to

evict whoever lived in her old home. Let the imperial office worry about law cases that might arise. The emperor's command sat over all.

The sun had set outside, bringing night to the city. Agrippina shook her head, as if she could pull it back up to light the world. She had been too long in the dark, too long helpless. That was at an end. The sun would rise.

I 8

Italus drew up at the estate south of Rome, reining in as the animal fought the bit, or his control. He was no horseman, not as Barbo had been. Or Agrippina, for that matter. As a praetorian, he could march twenty-five to thirty miles a day, almost for ever. Horses may have been faster over short distances, but there was something comforting in just swinging along a road, loose and easy.

He whistled to the gate and went through into a courtyard with a mounting block. Italus nodded to a house slave to take the reins, stepping down. His horse was valuable, so he had come to understand. The prefect of the praetorians had certainly been eaten up with jealousy. Italus watched as the animal was walked away to be brushed, watered and given oats. It was not lost on him that the young man was part of Agrippina's old staff. Many of her slaves had been sold away in the years of exile. That might have been an impossible obstacle to some people – most people.

Her husband shook his head as he stood there. Agrippina had used the imperial seals on her deed of ownership

like a weapon. She had laid claim to every part of the Ahenobarbus holdings, accepting neither substitutes nor excuses. She had reassembled that fortune like a prize-winning team, using the threat of the emperor's displeasure to batter members of the nobilitas.

Italus thought about going into the house. He'd moved out there willingly enough, but it was not his, not as the house on the Quirinal had been. Instead, he had the sense of being a guest. An honoured guest without a doubt, but he could not decide to demolish a wall or sell a field. Without that freedom, what did he have, really?

His eyes drifted to the stables, right to the end of the block. He'd been pleased at first to find quadriga chariots in the gloom there. One was very old, the frame rusted, the wood covered in dust and needing grease and paint. The other had caught his imagination as soon as he realised what it was. That one had been brought back after Barbo's crash on the Campus Martius. It was little more than a collection of broken wood, a bent frame and one perfect wheel. The senator who'd bought the property from Caligula might have thrown it all on the fire, but he'd apparently hardly visited.

Making a decision, Italus walked across the yard and went in through the stable door. Inside, he looked at the results of months of work. Pride filled him. It had become the project of a season, while his wife ran around like a buzzing fly, busy with the fortunes of the Ahenobarbus clan. Some men might have objected, he'd thought at the time. Many times. They might have grown angry, or reminded her that as her husband, he had a claim on that fortune, one higher than her own. He had not said that to her, however. He had told himself he was pleased to see

Agrippina restored to life and energy, even if it meant they hardly saw one another. Italus had split his time between his duties as a praetorian and restoring the quadriga. It had become his obsession.

The horse he'd ridden had been taken to one of the other stalls, further down the block. He could just hear the soft swish as the animal was rubbed down, snickering to its mates and pleased to be home. In his part of the stables, Italus took a rag from a nail and wiped his hands with it. They were made to fit a sword hilt, that was true. They weren't completely useless with a box plane or cutting a simple joint, however. It brought him peace, just working in silence, breathing slowly in the dusty air.

He rasped flint and ridged steel into oil-soaked wool, producing a little flame he used to light a lamp and then a smaller flame under his pot of hoof glue. That set hard every night when he blew it out. When he began again, it had to be warmed and stirred, going from brown glass to something like honey. It gripped wood well enough, which was what mattered.

He cracked his neck and fingers as he stood there, feeling weary but not uncomfortable. The chariot was almost finished and he still wasn't sure if he would ever drive it, or leave it like a funeral trophy, remade in honour of a great man.

Italus ran his hand along the new wooden panels. The originals been too broken to fix, but he'd copied the designs and used the same colours. Even the thicknesses of the wood were the same, though he'd had to go to a master carpenter in Rome. That man had led him to a smith willing to remake the iron frame the teams called a basket, that gave the whole thing form. A wheelwright had been paid to copy

the complete original, working magic with tiny weights glued to the wood. It had all come together, the product of a team. All that was left was securing the side panels, wood joined to wood around iron spars so slender he could bend them in his hands. It seemed even flimsier than before, now he knew how it was made. Yet ones just like it would race at full gallop around the track at the Circus, guided by young men willing to risk their lives for fame, riches and the roar of the crowd.

Italus heard a creak on the floorboards behind him. The stables were made of old wood and half the beams and pegs had warped. He spoke without looking round, knowing who it had to be. That thought came with a pang of sadness. Agrippina would not have come to watch him work.

‘Lucius? Check the glue for me, would you? It should have softened by now.’

He heard the boy breathing as he ran over. Five years old and still built like a little block. He actually could have been Italus’ son, except for his hair. That was as dark as his mother’s, while Italus could barely run a hand through his tight red locks.

He glanced over his shoulder and smiled to see the little boy prodding at the glue pot.

‘It’s almost done,’ Lucius said.

‘Let me see. You can help with these panels. I need someone to smear the glue on the runners while I lower it into place. Can you do that?’

‘*Course* I can,’ the boy said.

Italus grinned at his confidence. Agrippina’s son never doubted he could do anything. It had become a joke between them.

‘*Course* you can,’ Italus repeated, making the boy laugh.

He checked the glue had softened enough, stirring the thick liquid with a brush older than the boy. The smell was something else he had grown to associate with the work. Italus breathed it in.

‘Take it, then,’ he said. ‘Be generous with it – all along that line. See where I’m pointing?’ All right, let me get the panel ready . . . go.’

He watched as the little boy painted glue on the panel, smearing the stuff thickly on three sides. The one Italus held had been measured and shaved and sanded until it would slide in, held by overlapping ridges. It was a thing of beauty. When Lucius stepped back, he found the right position and pushed it down.

It stuck about halfway. Italus cursed under his breath. The tolerances had been so fine he’d forgotten the glue would take up its own space, even swell the wood.

‘Fetch me that mallet, boy, quickly!’

Lucius handed it to him and he began tap-tapping along the length, breathing more easily as it continued to drop into the slot.

‘Come on, you bitch . . .’ he muttered.

Lucius grinned at that and Italus sighed.

‘Do not repeat what you hear, remember? Like that time I hit my hand with the hammer. Those are not words for little ones, or for you to tell your mother. Is that understood?’

‘I know. Look, it’s almost in.’

Italus winced. The downward movement had come to a halt. If he hit any harder, he ran the risk of cracking the wood. Yet the glue was cooling and he had to risk it.

‘Hands clear, then,’ he said.

Two hammer blows rang out – and the panel slid home. Italus wiped sweat from his brow. If it had jammed, he'd been close to wrestling it back out, and if it hadn't snapped apart, that would have been another week of stripping glue, sanding, filling cracks. It was more peaceful standing in a battle line, he sometimes thought.

He wasn't even sure why he was taking such pains with Barbo's chariot, restoring it. Then he saw how Lucius ran his little hands over the panel and remembered. Some things were worth doing.

'You'll take this out when you're a little older,' Italus said.

Lucius nodded.

'I will. My father was a great charioteer, a champion.'

Italus looked at him, his expression slightly sadder than before.

'Yes he was,' he said. 'Come on, we have to leave this to settle. Put the glue back and snuff the lamps. Your mother will be wondering where you've gone.'

'No she won't,' Lucius said under his breath.

Italus ruffled his hair as they went out.

Italus jerked awake. He had been a legionary for eighteen years and he rarely slept so deeply that he could not roll out of bed in an instant. He was not sure what had wakened him, but he'd spent too many nights on watch or on campaign to ignore it. Noises in the night meant death. If some part of him knew he was in the Ahenobarbus house twenty miles from Rome and not some hostile camp in Thrace or Gaul, it didn't really matter. He wore a light, sleeveless tunic while he slept, reaching almost to his knees. That too was a habit from campaigning, when a

camp could be roused for drill or attack no matter the hour. Just as importantly, he had snatched up his sword, the scabbarded blade a solid weight in his hand. It was for that reason he laid it out as he went to sleep each evening. Agrippina and Lucius were in that house. The responsibility for their safety lay with him, no other.

His jangling nerves began to settle and he yawned into a closed fist. It had probably been some slave getting up early to light the kitchen fire. In his house on the Quirinal, Italus would have known all the sounds and snored right through them. That was the joy of a home he knew. In Agrippina's house – no, in their house – he was still a stranger.

Sighing to himself, he stepped out into the corridor. Houses had been robbed before. A husband had to check. He looked into darkness, turning his head back and forth for the slightest sound. Agrippina slept in a room some way from his own. She said she stayed up very late with the accounts and hated to keep him awake. He could see no light from her room, though. It was not uncommon for husbands and wives to sleep apart. Yet he could hardly remember when . . .

He froze. One sound that had no place in that house was men whispering. Italus blinked as sleepiness dropped away. He flung the scabbard down, drawing the gladius with a sound like a struck note in the night.

'To arms! Advance!' he roared, running towards the sound. It was a cry he might have made on some foreign hill, at the top of his voice. In the stillness of the dark, it crashed out. Other voices called in fear and he knew the house was rousing around him.

He saw something move ahead and made a decision

that was as much the memory of years of training as anything conscious. The gladius was a hacking weapon and he brought it down as a shadow loomed at him. There was a grunt of pain and Italus found himself in a fight with someone fast and skilled. He reacted in the gloom, sensing movements and using his blade to block. When they lurched together, he kicked out low down, seeking a kneecap or shin. Of course, he wasn't wearing his boots. The result was a spike of pain through his toes, but the man he was struggling with overbalanced and fell.

Italus jammed the point of the gladius into him three or four times at high speed. None of the wounds would be immediately fatal, but pain and shock was sometimes enough to panic an opponent. A centurion learned a few nasty tricks in a lifetime of service. Men compared notes on winning fights in dark alleys. When lives were at stake, there were no rules.

The man came up fast, despite the damage he'd taken. Italus held his arm, certain he had a blade though he couldn't see one. A chill rippled through him as he understood. Legionaries polished their personal iron. There was another group who blackened them in soot and oil, preferring to be invisible in the dark.

'Guards!' Italus roared into the man's face.

The bark added to the assassin's confusion, freezing him in place. In the instant, Italus shoved him back against the wall and jammed one thumb into his eye, trying to push it right in. The man made an awful sound, gasping and hissing. He pulled clear, but it meant there was a moment when he was just trying to save his eye. In that single heartbeat, Italus thrust his sword up under the short ribs, working it back and forth. He felt pain on his arms as

the dying man bellowed and gashed at him, but all it did was make him wrench faster at the wound, until the hands fell limp.

The alarm had gone up as he'd fought. Light was appearing in all directions and the entire staff had come out in their nightclothes. As the assassin slid down the wall, Italus stood back, blood dripping from his fists. He was panting, he noticed. Nothing in the world exhausted a man like fighting for his life.

Agrippina was there, in a belted robe.

'What's happening?' she was shouting.

Italus saw one of the staff pointing.

'You – what is it?' Italus called.

The man's mouth was open in shock, but he stammered an answer.

'Two men pushed past me, dominus. That way.'

'With me!' Italus snapped. 'Weapons. Guard the mistress. Where is Lucius?'

His string of orders brought a strange calm to the rooms and corridors around them. Lucius appeared, struggling to break the hand of whichever servant had dragged him out of bed. Italus breathed in relief. If Agrippina and her son were safe, the attempt had failed – at least to that point.

He saw some of the house staff were armed, one with a cleaver from the kitchen.

'You – stay with the mistress and the boy. Your life for theirs. Understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'The rest of you – we need to find the rest of these intruders. We know the house better than they do – and they will be panicking. Find a weapon and come with me.'

He had them in formation with him in moments, charging down the corridor in a clatter of men and metal.

They heard a door crash ahead. Italus surged to the front, unless it was just that those with him allowed it. Not many men wanted to confront armed intruders in the dark, not when another could go first. He clenched his jaw. He couldn't blame them. This was his trade.

Unlike the fleeing men, Italus knew there was no way out to the gardens or stables from that part of the house. Whoever they were, they had trapped themselves in a room open to the night sky above . . .

He gaped as he saw a dark shape already climbing up. He roared again, the soldier's trick. It was amazing how often it froze an enemy just long enough to stick him with something sharp. He ran closer and the dark figure kicked out. Hanging from a rope, it should have been clumsy, but it connected. Italus was wide and powerful and he'd been thumped and battered a thousand times over the course of his career. His head rocked to one side and he saw a flash of light, but he recovered, hacking his gladius over and over into the writhing shadow. He heard the man grunt in pain, the sound made liquid.

House servants spread out behind him, coming into the room. It smelled of herbs, Italus thought suddenly. The air was rich and earthy with all the things Agrippina grew. He heard some of the tables go over and there – *there* was the third man. The one climbing suddenly lost his grip, falling hard and groaning. Italus stabbed down at him, dropping a knee onto what turned out to be his chest. Ribs broke under his weight.

The remaining intruder fought like a maniac, but he had to know there was no escape, not then. He too wore black

and had smeared himself with darkness. It was hard to see where he stood or which hand held a blade. Italus shouted for him to give up, but the prospect of torture and execution didn't have much attraction. He kept fighting even as the servants surrounded him, stabbing and punching. One of them had snatched up a hammer and swung it wildly.

'All right, he's finished,' Italus said after a time. 'That's enough, I said! No point kicking him now, is there? Stand back!'

Gods, he hated the dark! The entire attack had taken place in the gloom of a crypt. Even then, he would not have recognised any of the three men, or the servants so keen on meting out damage now the intruders were safely dead.

'We don't know there are just these three,' Italus said to them. 'Spread out and search the entire house and grounds in pairs. Sing if you find anything at all and we'll all come running. Well? What, are you deaf? Go!'

They scattered from the room and he was left alone with the dead men. Italus remembered where Agrippina kept a flint and tinder. There was a little starlight from the open roof and he was grateful for that, though it was not enough. Being alone with corpses that seemed as much shadow as men was unpleasant and he felt his hands beginning to tremble. He gripped the ridged steel, striking it against flint for an age before there was a spark and then a tiny flame. By the gods, it mattered to have light! He touched the flame to a pair of wicks and a reservoir of oil on a shelf, bringing a golden glow to the room. The difference was life and hope and a lessening of fear.

He knelt then by the dead men, peering at them. Their faces were as dark as their knives, rubbed with lampblack

and old oil. It meant they'd been almost invisible in the night and he hated them for the fear they'd brought forth in him. It had made him savage, he realised, without mercy.

He could see his own wounds as well. Long shallow gashes had raised puckered welts on his skin along both arms. He shrugged, flexing his fingers. He'd had worse in his time. The three intruders had been skilled and vicious, but they'd failed – and they would not get another chance. He'd bring in praetorians, or train new guards to patrol the estate each night. He'd a good mind to stripe the back of whoever had responsibility for keeping Agrippina and Lucius safe . . .

'Italus?' he heard behind him.

He stood, feeling his heart go out to her. Agrippina looked vulnerable in her nightdress and he felt a great wave of relief that she was there and unharmed. It would be all right.

'Is Lucius safe?' he asked.

It was all that mattered. When she nodded, he stepped close to embrace her – and she put a hand flat against his chest. In the lamplight, Italus saw she was shaking with anger. She looked at him as if he were one of the intruders. He blinked in confusion. In that moment, he felt his wounds start to ache and a great weariness descend. He wanted to sit down, to eat and sleep. Instead, his wife faced him like an enemy and he couldn't understand what he had done.

19

Agrippina was trembling, her eyes huge. Italus wanted to embrace her, to draw her in and feel her arch under his hand, to bend her to his strength. Instead, she held him off with that cool palm on his chest. Her fingers were always cold. He could feel them on his skin.

‘Is Lucius all right?’ he asked again.

‘He’s fine. I had to stop him kicking the body of the first one.’

‘What’s wrong, then? Were you hurt?’

It sounded as if they had come through a storm without a major loss. He struggled to understand the fury he saw in her.

‘Hurt? No, they were after Lucius.’

‘*What?* How do you know that?’

‘He says he woke up and saw them. They were in his room.’

Italus swallowed, feeling cold.

‘How . . . Are you sure they didn’t hurt him?’

‘I’m sure. I found this on his bed.’

She brought a long, shimmering shape into the lamp's light. There was something deadly about the way it moved and he wanted to recoil. However, he was a praetorian. He bent closer, peering at the colours.

'Snakeskin,' he said. 'Big one.'

'Lucius said they were whispering about a great snake on the bed, but it was just this.' She shuddered. 'There's no sign of the snake itself, Italus. It shed its skin and slithered away into the gardens. I think it saved his life.'

In wonder, he reached out and touched it. The skin was like dry papyrus under his fingers. A spot of blood spread from his touch, like an eye.

'You're wounded,' Agrippina said. She said it in the same tone she might have announced a trip to the market. He supposed the preternatural calm was her reaction to fear and intrusion in her own home.

'It's nothing serious. I'll get the stable boy to stitch me up, with a little red wine poured on to keep it all clean. The knives are black with soot.'

She looked up sharply at that. Without a word, she reached down and examined a fallen blade. As he watched, she sniffed it.

'It might be poisoned,' she said, then shook her head. 'No, there's nothing there beyond a little char and oil. Your wounds will heal.'

There was no sympathy in her, he realised. He'd been expecting tearful thanks for saving her life and that of her son. He'd imagined her breasts pressed against him, her mouth hot on his as she wept and said how grateful she was for his courage. Instead, she was still seething, as if he'd done something wrong.

'Are you annoyed with me?' he asked.

She let a beat of time pass, as if she might not answer. Then she spoke.

‘For the way you took command in my home? For how you sent my own staff running at your orders, as if I had no say at all? About the way they obeyed you over me? No, Italus, why should I be annoyed?’

‘I *saved* you – and Lucius,’ he protested. Having to speak the words made it pitiful somehow.

‘Fear of a great snake saved Lucius,’ she snapped. ‘The superstitions of simple men saved Lucius. And the whole staff was there to defend me. You had no right to give orders in the way you did. Not here.’

He gaped at her, feeling his temper rising.

‘I am your *husband*,’ Italus retorted. ‘That gives me every right. And I will be a father to Lucius, whether you allow me to adopt him or not. He is my responsibility, just as you are.’

‘I didn’t need you,’ she said.

He thought she might fling the snakeskin at him, but she held back. The thing draped over her arm, reaching almost to the floor and swaying with her breaths. It had been a huge example of the species. He shuddered at the thought of it so close to Lucius. It reminded him of the tale of Hercules strangling snakes in his crib.

They could both see colours shimmering on the pale length of skin. The sun had risen and anger suddenly seeped out of Agrippina, replaced by exhaustion. She looked around at broken tables and the dark rope that still hung from the open roof.

‘I’ll go and see what other damage they’ve done,’ she said quietly. ‘I’ll have to fetch carpenters and masons from the city to make repairs.’

He saw she was losing the brittle edge and took a pace closer. Italus had seen a thousand different reactions to the presence of death. Some were fascinated by it, so that they tried to take keepsakes from the bodies. Others were reminded of their own mortality, so that nothing would ever be quite the same for them. Of course, his entire experience of violence and death had been with men, usually of the legions. He was not certain how a wife and mother would react to having her son threatened and almost killed.

‘Who do you think sent them?’ he said more gently.

She stood very still as she thought.

‘Not my uncle, I am sure. Claudius has his son and heir . . . and it was he who returned this estate to me. Three trained men, prepared to lose their lives? I have heard of guilds . . . of vast payments made for such things. It cannot be some petty slight, some old enemy.’

‘What about the Greens? In vengeance for what Barbo did?’

She considered it, but shook her head.

‘They gave up their claim when they heard who he was. It has been too long now for them to bear that grudge! No, there is only one who might want to kill my son, to remove a competitor for her own brood. Lucius may not be heir, but he is still five years older than her brat. While he lives, there is always a chance Lucius could rise, perhaps enough to eclipse another boy.’

‘*Messalina?*’ Italus said, his voice dropping to a breath. The prospect was horrifying. He had lived through Caligula’s mad rage. He had survived it! Having an emperor’s young wife focused on his family made him want to tear his hair in frustration.

‘It has to be her,’ Agrippina said. She tapped at her teeth with the flat of the assassin’s blade. ‘She has the fortune it would take to send such men to their deaths. They cannot have expected to survive. Were they skilled, Italus?’

‘Were they . . . ?’ He thought back. ‘Yes, they were. But Agrippina, if the emperor’s wife sent those men, there is no standing against her. We have to leave Rome, tonight. I’m close to retirement. I have some vineyards in Gaul where we can live. I . . . ?’

She laughed and he broke off in confusion.

‘Leave Rome? No, I won’t do that, Italus. I will move to destroy the threat, that is what I will do.’

‘You can’t move against *the emperor’s wife*,’ he hissed at her, taking her by the arm. Even to say the words aloud made him nervous. He had seen one emperor’s blood splashed on the ground. The memory of it was strong in him then.

Agrippina looked straight through her husband, as if he had left the room.

‘She is just a young woman, with a newborn son. I don’t have the wealth to send assassins of my own, even if they could reach her in the imperial rooms. No, the praetorians would stop them. Even if I could contact their dark guild, they’d never agree, not to the impossible.’

Her eyes flickered up to his and he knew she was wondering if he could be persuaded to break his oath. He shook his head before she could ask.

‘I won’t do anything like that,’ he said. ‘Certainly not to a woman.’

She pulled away from him.

‘Then what good are you? Lucius might have died tonight. *I* might have died tonight, and where were you? Snoring and useless. I might have one chance to strike

back – and with a man perfectly placed to do it, but suddenly your nerve has gone?’

‘I would not be trusted! If you are right and Messalina is behind what happened, would she allow me alone into her presence? No chance. And it would mean my life to try. Is that it, Agrippina? Is *that* what you want?’

She was still furious with him. He could see words bubbling up. He was suddenly desperate and spoke before she could.

‘If you wanted to bring her down . . .’ He hesitated, but her eyes were on him.

‘What do you know?’ she whispered.

‘When your brother was emperor, Claudius was called to his side all the time, day and night. Your uncle was beaten and humiliated, every day. His wife . . . well, Caligula chose her. She couldn’t love a man treated like dirt, do you understand? Messalina found solace in the arms of others. Claudius never knew, or if he did, he couldn’t do anything about it.’

‘Is the child his?’ Agrippina asked.

‘It doesn’t matter, does it? The boy is legally his heir, just as Augustus adopted Tiberius. No, what *matters* . . .’ He grimaced. His praetorian oath had been to protect the imperial family unto death or disgrace. What he knew would give Agrippina power over the emperor’s wife, perhaps Claudius himself. ‘What matters is that she still visits a legion mapmaker every now and then. They meet in the city and no one says a word.’

He was ashamed, as if the words were somehow tainted. Yet she nodded and looked pleased, tapping him on the arm. He rubbed that spot with his free hand, feeling unclean.

‘That will do,’ she said softly. ‘I can use that.’

The shadow of years past haunted Agrippina as she worked through the layers of protection around the emperor’s private rooms. She had been there when both Tiberius and Gaius ruled. There had been a sense of fear in the air then, unless it had been her imagination. For the reign of Claudius, the imperial estate seemed quieter. She passed scribes with scrolls piled high and sticking out from under their arms. There was the sense almost of a hive, with the praetorians ready to challenge at every level.

It had taken vague talk of her uncle’s wishes to get so deep before. On this night, she had brought dark-smearing corpses and shown them to shocked praetorians on guard. They passed her on and on, through the rings and checkpoints.

She clenched her jaw, shaking her head like a twitch. She travelled to the heart of a web with no protection. One of the emperor’s private staff walked ahead, the man pale at what he had heard described. Assassins in a child’s room, darkened knives? It was obscene.

Two praetorians marched at her back, reminding her of Italus in their solidity. He had refused to let her go without him, at least at first. She couldn’t tell him how the world became simple when she stood alone. The presence of others meant weakness and confusion. Alone, she could control the scene.

Even then, she thought he might have insisted. He had a stubborn streak and he took his role as husband seriously. Her thoughts flailed as she considered him. Lucius liked him, at least. That had been the card she’d had to play to keep Italus out of Rome that night. Someone had to

keep Lucius safe! If Agrippina didn't return from the imperial palace, Italus was ready to vanish with him. He'd sworn an oath and Agrippina knew he had some sense that his word and honour were intertwined. There were times when she felt something approaching affection for him, a slow kindling of embers that had been cold her whole life. She remembered the way he had taken command in her own home, ordering her staff around. How easily it had come to him, that authority! She supposed he had risen to centurion for the same qualities, the same quick and certain strength. She found she was trembling again. This was a new day, with new challenges. The scribe was increasing his speed as he approached the private rooms. Agrippina drew in a huge breath and put all her worries and fears aside.

She stood still as the praetorians carried news of her presence inside. As she waited, Agrippina rubbed a thumb over the kohl her slaves had applied so carefully in the small hours of that morning, smearing it. She could not weep, not as some women did, not easily. Yet she could look as if she had. Claudius would expect disarray, with the story she had to tell.

The final doors opened and she swept in, leaving half a dozen of the imperial staff in her wake. She had expected the plush couches from before, the huge oil pit that burned day and night when the air turned cold. Instead, the room had been cleared and in the centre stood a vast tabletop painted in blue and green. She saw the banners of twenty-eight legions standing like wooden dolls on its surface and as she approached and looked down, she saw blue sea, with tiny little boats painted on the surface. It was fine work and she knew it meant the empire was moving. It

gave her a sense of dislocation, of dizziness, to consider it, but Claudius was coming to her. He held out his arms and it was only then, as she looked into his eyes, that she was sure he had played no part in the attack.

‘Uncle, it was terrible,’ she said, burying her face in his chest. He was a small man, so she had to stoop a little to do it. His hand fell naturally to stroking her hair.

‘I heard, m-my dear. How awful. I s-still remember the night . . .’

Claudius blinked, looking around at the senior men he had gathered to that place. They were generals and merchant princes, ready for a campaign across land and sea. They stared at Agrippina, at a young woman of extraordinary beauty in distress, in a stola and cowl that flattered her form. Claudius frowned.

‘Gentlemen, I th-think that is all f-for this evening. Return here . . . at n-noon tomorrow.’

They filed out and Agrippina was alone with the most powerful man in the world. The only sound was the fluttering of torches on the walls. The windows were unshuttered and she knew she would see the entire city laid out before her if she crossed to them.

She made a sobbing sound, muffled by his toga.

‘They tried to kill Lucius, uncle. They came . . . into his room. There was a snakeskin on the bed and I think it frightened them . . .’

‘Shh, Agrippina, shh,’ he murmured.

He guided her away from the vast map of legions and seas, sitting with her on a couch against the wall. Agrippina leaned into him, taking comfort.

‘I understand y-your h-husband fought them off?’ he said. ‘Of c-course, he is a trained m-man, one of the very

b-best. I thank the g-gods he was there to keep you and L-Lucius safe.'

'You are a good man, Claudius. I have always known it. I sometimes think our family is cursed. We have lost so much of what we love.'

'Not this t-time, though, my dear. Not your s-son. Hold to that.'

She leaned back then and he saw how the kohl had smudged. It made her eyes even larger in the gold of the lamps and he regarded her for a time.

'Three men of that s-sort, with d-darkened knives . . . that is not a c-common thing, Agrippina. I don't think you realise how d-difficult it would be to arrange s-such an attack. Whoever was b-behind it . . . I have men I trust, who will seek them out. I p-promise you, we will find who is responsible.'

'Thank you. I hope Messalina appreciates your kindness, Claudius. You are a good man – and Rome needs a good man to rule.'

'Oh . . .' He hesitated, but they were alone. 'M-Messalina has no t-time for me, these days. Since my son was b-born, at least. She has her own st-staff, her own r-rooms on the Palatine. I hardly see her. And m-my work comes before all, Agrippina! Come and see.'

He rose and took her hand naturally enough, leading her back to the great map that dominated the room. Agrippina watched as he took a long stick and used it to move a legion banner closer to tiny wooden ships. It was those shapes, like a child's toy boats, that made her grip the edge and lean closer in wonder. It was a shore. If the blue was the sea, the green was land. She gaped, almost forgetting what she had come there to do.

‘It is wonderful,’ she said. ‘The banners are legions, then? The ships . . .’

‘The ships are to t-take them across the sea to a n-new land – one that Julius Caesar himself c-could not hold and m-make his own. I have read his words, Agrippina. M-mines of tin and g-gold and lead, of course – strong slaves for our m-markets, savages who paint themselves blue and fight with huge war dogs at their side. B-Britannia will be our northern b-border, drawn into the empire. An empire worthy of the name, Agrippina! My n-name will resound in the ears of all those who d-doubted me then.’

‘I hope Messalina is as proud of you as I am,’ she said. ‘In truth, Claudius, I knew about her . . . indiscretions. My husband told me and my heart broke for you. You deserve to be loved, adored. Look at this map, at what you will do! The world will know your name. I’m just sorry to hear she has grown cold to you.’

Claudius clenched his jaw. He blushed as he stammered his reply.

‘There *w-were* . . . indiscretions, as you s-say, in the past. When your b-blessed brother was emperor. I . . . well, I knew about them. M-Messalina was left alone, for too long. It was a time of t-terror, of m-madness, Agrip . . . pina. I have p-put all that b-behind me, do you understand?’

‘I know it is your mercy that speaks,’ she said, touching him lightly on the arm. ‘If I were your wife, Claudius, I would honour you in all ways. Of course you know about her affairs! You are the very heart of decency and forgiveness. And in truth, if she finds physical comfort in the arms of this Vinicius, what does that matter, as long as she is loyal in all other ways?’

‘I am unsure . . .’ he said. Claudius had paled, she saw, though whether it was in shock or anger she could not tell. ‘Are you s-saying she s-still . . .’

Agrippina pressed her hand to her open mouth.

‘I’m so sorry, uncle. I thought you knew and forgave, or didn’t care what she did with some mapmaker. She bore you a son and heir, Claudius. That is all . . .’ She broke off, as if a thought had just occurred to her. He glowered, following her train of thought well enough. Was the child not his?

She saw a hard glint come to his eye and hid her joy. Claudius may have been the scholar of the family, but he was not weak. No, he could be ruthless, as much as was needed.

‘I have said too much,’ Agrippina breathed, reaching out once more and holding his forearm. He didn’t seem to notice, but she caught the tension in him, the awareness of how close she stood.

‘No, my dear, you’ve . . . h-helped me. I n-need to know these things, all things. Yes. You don’t realise, but I . . . n-need to t-trust. It is important, Agrippina.’

Once more, she rested her head on his chest, enduring the ache it brought to her curving spine.

‘I know how it is,’ she said. ‘I think sometimes you and I are the only ones who really understand one another.’

She leaned back then, but as she did, he came forward and kissed her on the mouth. She blinked in shock. She played with fire when she manipulated men, she knew that. They could be consumed – and in return, there was always a danger they could consume her.

She broke away, seeing surprise bloom in his eyes. He hadn’t known he would do it and he raised one hand to her lips as if to wipe away his touch.

‘I’m sorry, uncle,’ she said, forcing distance between them. ‘Let me go home. I am weary.’

‘Of course,’ he said, already shrinking into himself, embarrassed by what he had done.

Agrippina went out of the room, leaving behind its dizzying maps and dreams of the world. She strode through the cloisters of the Palatine, her thoughts blazing so brightly she felt she could light the way all on her own. She had sown a seed. When it surely flowered, she would have her victory and she would rejoice.

20

Italus sat at a simple table in the estate kitchen. He preferred the country way to the couches of the city. It meant he could rest his elbows on polished wood and not feel an ache grow in his neck from sitting balanced on a hand for too long. It was all very well for young men to lie on their stomachs to eat. For one in his forties, he found it easier to sit on a simple three-legged stool, with his wife across from him.

Agrippina had dismissed the staff. He had the impression she understood there was ground to be made up between them. She had returned from Rome with a visible sense of dark delight and a light step. He'd seen at a glance that she had used what he'd told her, dropping poison into the ear of the emperor about his wife. It was dangerous, more than she knew.

Italus had a better idea than Agrippina of an emperor's reach. Most of the nobilitas had clients, passing a monthly stipend to a few useful men. It was nothing so crude as bought support, but still, money changed hands and if a call came, the clients were expected to respond. It was the

heart of the Roman system and it worked well for those who could afford it.

The emperor had access to unlimited personal wealth. On duty in the Palatine, Italus had glimpsed hundreds of imperial clients going in and out like bees, drawn to power. Some of them might have been inherited, but most were new – one group rising as another fell. Claudius spent as lavishly as Caligula had done, though not on aqueducts and huge statues. No, he spent on the legions, supplying them with everything they needed. More importantly, he maintained more clients than the entire senate combined. Italus suspected some of those men or women would be following Messalina wherever she went from then on. Perhaps Agrippina too. There could be eyes on them all, busy little bees, all collecting information to pass back to the emperor's ear.

Italus still regretted telling his wife about Messalina's lover. It was an open secret in the praetorians, but it didn't seem too great a sin, not after years. She met her lover once or twice a month and it wasn't clear to Italus who was hurt by that. Now that he had told Agrippina, he knew he was responsible for whatever came of it. That idea sat poorly with him.

He chewed a little bread, dipping it in oil and a thick garum sauce he loved. Agrippina had made a point of purchasing it in the city. He knew she was trying to apologise, in her way.

'This is very good,' he said. 'Are we alone tonight?'

'I sent the servants to bed. I thought you would appreciate a little time with just the two of us. I can pour the wine and serve. I grew up in army camps in Germania, remember. Everyone just grabbed a bowl and made do.' For a moment, she seemed wistful, which surprised him.

‘You don’t usually look back with such fondness,’ he said.

She smiled as she filled his cup, waited for him to taste it before topping up. It was a good red, full of old sunlight. He added a little water to it even so.

In moments, they were seated across from one another, cutting into calf’s liver Agrippina herself had fried in butter. Each bite was as rich and dark as the wine and melted in his mouth. Strong flavours, he thought idly. An old memory teased him, but he could not pin it down. His wife was a strong flavour. Perhaps he was as well.

‘Is Lucius asleep?’ he asked.

She nodded.

‘He snores, Italus. Oh, you should hear it. After dinner, though. He sleeps like a lion, sprawled on his bed.’

He smiled in reply, seeing her pride, her happiness, feeling its answer grow in him. Unless it was just the wine, of course.

‘Would you like more liver?’ she asked, rising and turning to the stove.

It was a big thing of black iron and brick, fed by charcoal that gleamed red in the night. It meant the kitchen was always warm, the heart of the estate house. Italus might not have felt quite at home anywhere in that estate, but he was most comfortable there. He refilled his wine cup and added just a splash of water. Agrippina took his bowl and ladled in a slice of liver and some dark cabbage.

‘Good for the blood,’ she said.

She was trying, he could see that. He leaned back in his chair and when she sat down, he raised his cup in toast to her.

‘Thank you for all this, Agrippina. I . . . look, I’m sorry I took command when the assassins came. I should . . .’

‘It’s forgotten,’ she said quickly. ‘I should not have been so angry with you. You are a soldier, a praetorian! Of course you overruled me in my own home.’

An edge had returned to her voice, but she smiled and shook her head, hearing it. He ate another mouthful of liver and cabbage, then drizzled olive oil over the rest and belched. He cleared his throat then, feeling that he might cough.

‘I swear to you, I have forgiven that,’ she murmured.

She was watching him, her eyes dark in the soft kitchen light. The lamps were low, he realised. The glow of the oven was gentle. It was a peaceful scene and he drank more wine to clear his throat. He did not want to break the mood with a hard sound, so put his hand over his mouth and growled into it.

‘Other things are more difficult,’ she said, her voice a whisper.

He could not answer and so raised his eyebrows in question. He would have to cough, there was no way around it. His damned throat felt swollen, as if he were coming down with something. He leaned over and made a huge sound, almost violent. He was red-faced by the time he sat up straight again, mopping his head with a cloth.

‘Sorry . . . something went down the wrong way,’ he said, his voice strained.

‘It’s all right. You are a strong man – a strong husband. You were there when I had nothing and I was grateful. But how much longer will it be before you try to command my fortune as well? As my husband, the law stands with you, I know. Barbo used to say he could lock me in a room and there wasn’t a court in Rome that would make him open that door, even if I starved to death.’

‘He . . . I’m sorry . . .’ Italus held up a finger as he

coughed again. His throat felt raw. He tried to drink more wine and a cough came up as he did, spraying red droplets. ‘Blast . . .’ he growled, furious with himself.

As he mopped, his wife kept speaking, sitting as if in a dream, words pouring from her.

‘The Ahenobarbus estate is mine, Italus. I earned it, from the age of thirteen when I was given in marriage to a man of thirty, a man who knew how to beat dogs and horses – and me. All for our own good. So when I had the chance to take command – as you did, on that night – who would expect me to give it up? The land, the houses, the money – it is freedom for me.’

She saw something like understanding come to his eyes as he looked up at her. She nodded.

‘I cannot let you take all that. You are a natural officer, Italus. I saw that, no, I understood that, on the night the assassins came. Sooner or later, you will take all that is mine – and make it yours.’

She sighed as he began to struggle. Italus was a fit man, still in his prime and always dangerous. If he rose and came at her, she was ready to leap away.

‘Lucius too, is mine. I saw the way you repaired that chariot together. For what? To bring back some memory of his father? To be one? He does not need another! I will be mother and father to him. I am all he needs, all he will ever need.’

He tried to stand then, but the effort was too much. One hand clutched a throat that had swollen completely closed, his skin red and sweating as he fought for breath. Agrippina looked at him in sorrow.

‘It was in the liver. Of course I will *say* it was a fishbone, Italus. A tragedy. A brave man snagged on a single hook. I

will honour you in death and always speak well of you. Yet the truth is simpler . . . ?

She watched him for a time, wondering at his endurance.

‘When I was exiled, I was in the dark for most of the first year,’ she said. Her eyes reflected old fear, wide and empty. ‘Can you imagine that? I couldn’t see *anything*, not my hands and feet, nothing. I was just . . . thought, a little stone in the blackness. And I swore: if I ever saw the world again, if I came home, I would not bend. I would be that little stone . . . and I would choke the ones who hurt me.’

‘I . . . *loved* . . . ?’ The words were snarls, forced through swollen flesh with huge effort.

‘I know. But you may not have what is mine . . . ?’ Her teeth showed suddenly, sharp and white. ‘And you took part, Italus, when Caligula was killed. You should *never* have hurt my brother.’

Italus fell, even his extraordinary will failing him in the end. He looked up at her from the flagstone floor, as if he wanted his last glimpse to be of her. Agrippina stood over him, her eyes glittering. In wonder, she raised a hand, seeing wetness on her fingers.

‘Go,’ she said softly and in awe. He could not resist any longer.

When the room was silent, she cleaned his bowl, scraping the pieces of liver onto the coals of the fire so that they sizzled and gave off a bitter smoke. She looked around the room then, before turning the table over with a crash. The servants heard and came running.

The funeral pyre rose on a still day, an almost unbroken line of grey ash and oil. The senate had honoured a senior

praetorian officer, second only to the prefect and legate himself. Or perhaps they chose to honour a man who sat close to the emperor. Claudius had come out to the estate. For once, the praetorians who guaranteed his safety would have wanted to be there anyway to bid farewell to one of their own. Everything it meant to be alive could be snatched away: in a failing heartbeat, in a night of fever, in a sudden fall, in a poisoned wound, in a bone stuck in a man's throat. That awareness was in them all as the new priest of Jupiter sacrificed a bull and watched the flow of blood sink into the earth. There would be beef for the feast – and enough wine to drown a man's memory.

The little boy had walked away when all eyes had been on the flames, rising like a tongue to the afternoon sky. The entire staff were out there in the back field. His mother would be weeping, while Emperor Claudius remained to give her honour. Lucius curled his lip at the thought. The air was warm, the sun bright on his skin. He had seen horses harnessed many times. He could do this.

The first pair he brought out were both sixteen years old. His father's racing mounts had earned a peaceful retirement. They still flicked their tails, snorting and stamping when he brought them to the mounting step and worked a headpiece over their ears. Perhaps they missed what he had never known, he thought. Lucius had to lean out at a precarious angle to attach the long reins, working buckles with his fingers.

'Come on, come . . . on,' he muttered. How long would his mother weep in front of the men in robes? Ever since he'd realised the house would be empty, he'd been thinking of this, planning for it. Italus would approve, he thought. That would be his prayer of farewell.

He lashed the reins around part of the mounting block and raced across the yard to open the doors to the last part of the stables. At five years old, even a racing chariot was almost too heavy for him. He heaved at it, leaning right back to start it rolling, then skidding on the stones as he used the central bar to guide it out.

At his back, the two mounts snorted and whinnied, making the boy wince. They knew very well what the chariot meant. He just hoped none of the servants would wander over to check on him.

He manoeuvred the chariot by the slender iron stem that stretched from its front to the horses' necks. The animals were trained for this, but they felt his lack of certainty and he had to stop and lead one back three times, until he was red-faced and close to tears of frustration.

Whenever he glanced over, the pyre was still spreading oily ash into the air. It took time to burn a body. He had asked his mother and she'd said so. Lucius nodded to the line of smoke, hoping Italus could see him as he rose up.

The horses settled right down when the neck bar rested on their shoulders. Lucius cursed when he saw he'd forgotten the leather that was meant to go under it. He had to climb the mounting block again to shove it under, then brought out the two flanking mounts, completing the team around the central pair. He was sweating by the time they were all ready, but it looked right. He'd stared in fascination at racing teams often enough, memorising every detail. Having a chariot under his hand made him tremble with anticipation.

He stepped onto the plate and found to his dismay that he was too short to see over the edge. He cast around him – the mounting block was made of stone and useless.

He needed . . . He ran into the stables and emptied tools out of a wooden box. It jammed into the quadriga as if it had been made to hold him. He clambered up then and froze. The gate to the road was still closed!

Someone called out behind as he sprinted across the yard. A woman's voice. His mother? He set his jaw and ignored it, though he felt his flush deepen. He knocked the beam away and left it on the ground as he heaved the door open, then raced back to the mounting step, leaping onto the box and snatching up the reins.

'Lucius! Get down from there!' his mother was saying. 'Stop him, one of you, before he kills himself.'

He did not turn. He could hear running steps, but he had time to snap the reins up and down. The horses wanted to run, he could see it in them. They want to feel the wind build, just as he did.

He ducked as he passed through the gates, though he didn't need to. He could hear his mother shrieking by then, making herself the centre of attention. It didn't matter. He was free . . .

He risked a glance back when he heard steps coming closer. Lucius panicked at the sight of a young legionary sprinting after him, gaining fast.

'Go! Go!' he yelled in a high voice, snapping the reins. The quad lunged away and the running man was left to clutch empty air, the wheels skidding on the stones of the road.

Lucius let them run free for a while, until he found his balance. Some small part feared what his mother would do when he came back, but not then. The air was cold as the speed built. It should have frightened him, but he didn't let it. His father had been a charioteer. Italus had remade the

wood and iron over a thousand hours of patient labour. Lucius honoured both men as he shouted to the sky, driving the horses on.

It had to end. The effort of holding the reins taut turned his arms to loose twine after a surprisingly short time. His legs were stronger, he thought with pride. He could have stood and balanced all day on that box. Even when part of it gave way under his weight and almost spilled him onto the road. He recovered with a spasm of fear, blowing hard as he heaved back, putting all his weight into halting four horses.

They too were growing weary, after the initial excitement. He wanted to reach out and pat them for their efforts, but it was too far. A mile, perhaps two from his house, he came to a halt. He was breathing hard and glowing with joy at what he had done. Whatever his mother would do to him, he had honoured his father – and Italus. There were times when they became one man in his mind, so that he could not keep them separate.

Turning the horses was not as easy as he'd thought it would be. He heaved on one rein and the other fell to the road, so that he had to jump out and snatch it back up. He was glad there was no one there to see that. He wanted to head back to the stables, to come in through the main gate and see awe in their faces. All those sour old men would see him and remember who his father had been. They would envy his youth and look at their own sons in dismay . . .

He grinned to himself as the horses walked him home. They seemed to have lost the desire to run and they positively ambled. His arms and stomach ached, he noted. The muscles were weak there. Well, he would have to lift

weights like the praetorians to make himself strong. A charioteer had to survive seven full laps at top speed. Still, it was not too bad for a first attempt.

The sound of wheels returning brought his mother onto the road. Lucius tried to grin at her, but her expression was forbidding. Men in senatorial robes were there and Lucius tried to look through them. He would not be ashamed! Let them think of their own weak sons.

He felt himself lifted and didn't struggle as a soldier put him onto the road. It was the same one who had raced out before, he realised. The man was smiling to himself, hidden from his mother and all the others.

'You've good balance, lad,' the praetorian said. 'I'll give you that. I thought you'd fall and break your neck, but you didn't. Now, you'll take your whipping like a praetorian. No wailing or complaining, all right? Whatever your mother says, your father would be proud of you.'

'And Italus?' Lucius asked him.

The young man nodded, taking the question very seriously.

'He was my centurion, son. So I can tell you, he would be *very* proud. Italus loved the races. Anyway, you brought it back in one piece, didn't you?'

He patted Lucius on the shoulder just as Agrippina arrived. She grabbed her son's arm and half-dragged him back to the gate. The prospect of the boy being punished made some of the men laugh, but not the one who had lifted him down. He waited until Lucius looked back, nodding to him.

'Courage, lad,' he said softly. 'Courage.'

21

The private rooms on the Palatine had changed when Claudius became emperor. Neither Caligula nor Tiberius had been concerned with history or the written word. They had tended to favour more sensual surroundings, from polished stone to the beat of flames. Those things were still there, but now scrolls and bound parchments rested on every table, piled high. It drove the servants to distraction. Claudius was in the habit of leaving them open at a point of reference. If he returned to find they had been put away, he would stamp about in a fury. Agrippina thought it odd that he couldn't find what he had put down. If he saw her, he would ask almost plaintively if she had seen his Livy or his *Conquest of Gaul*, or that set of plays by Aeschylus. He was blind to them all, apparently, the moment they left his hand.

Agrippina hummed peacefully to herself, shifting her weight and wiggling her bare feet on a rug from half a world away. It was warm beneath her toes, unless it was the stone itself, heated by some strange pipes. There were

wonders in Rome and she knew Claudius felt the cold, just as she did. Perhaps it was something in the blood that made them all hard to keep warm.

Agrippina sat at the emperor's feet, as proper as any matron of Rome with her legs tucked under her. The sound of children's voices was usually an irritant, but she found herself smiling as they played and laughed. She didn't have to warn Lucius to be on his best behaviour any longer. He was fairly indifferent to the baby Tiberius, but he liked his cousin Octavia. Claudius' daughter was only a couple of years younger and she was a delightful, fat little thing, given to giggling at anything Lucius did to amuse her.

The night had grown dark outside the windows. Agrippina saw the figures of praetorians on duty there, standing for hours on a walkway like statues in bronze, all to protect the emperor. Claudius had not found the source of the assassins sent to kill her son, though she could not fault him for his efforts. Two taverns had been reduced to rubble on the suspicion of being a meeting place for some guild of knives and secrets. There had been a shrine to a foreign god in the basement of one, she remembered, with a wooden cross on the wall. It served as a warning, either way. The emperor and his family were above petty politics and vengeance. They were not to be touched, on pain of utter destruction.

Agrippina looked up at the man who sat turning scrolls slowly in his hands, committing lines to memory. Claudius was squinting again, she realised. At intervals, he paused to close his eyes and rub the bridge of his nose. He would complain of a headache before long and be forced to put the histories away. Yet she was sure he enjoyed the evenings they spent together.

It had begun after the funeral for Italus, when her son had risked his neck trying to be his father. As if she'd let a boy of hers become another Barbo! Agrippina frowned in memory of that day. She had ordered the chariot burned and her son had gone completely berserk, bellowing things she could only assume he had picked up from Italus or the servants. There had been no comforting him and he'd been cold to her for days. It had been Claudius who'd suggested she bring Lucius in to play with his two children, that it might serve to put his grief behind him.

Agrippina watched Octavia climbing on to ride her son like a pony. The little girl held on to his hair and Lucius raced around on his hands and knees at high speed, snorting and making her shriek. Claudius had been right, obviously. Lucius was headstrong and still making sense of the loss of Italus. Yet he liked the city, with all its light and noise. He was more at home there than on the estate, Agrippina had to admit. Blood ran true, perhaps, though it galled her to think of it. No, a mother could control such things. She had the will and it was far greater than his, for all his tantrums.

Agrippina felt a shiver pass across her, though it was not cold or some trembling of the spirit. Carved columns lay at one end of that room and there was movement there. It might just have been one of the emperor's vast staff, but Agrippina had seen Messalina wore a green dress, glimpsed as she arrived with her son. That same colour flashed on the edge of her sight and Agrippina suspected she was being observed.

Slowly, lazily, she leaned over and patted Claudius on the foot. He looked up from his scrolls, raising his eyebrows. The slightest touch seemed to fluster him, as always.

She thought it was some combination of the law about his person being sacrosanct and his general awkwardness around women. She made a point of embracing him tightly every time they met, pressing her cheek to his or kissing his ear. He always smiled when she did that, though it was with an element of surprise.

‘I was thinking,’ she said, ‘if it might be good for the boys to attend the amphitheatre next month. They are going to flood the centre and stage some great battle in boats.’

‘In galleys, dear,’ Claudius corrected gently. ‘Though they will be half-size, as I heard it.’

He looked over to where Lucius had stopped to listen. The emperor’s daughter was caught mid-laugh, perched on his back like a grasshopper. His son was crawling on his belly towards them with determination in his expression. Claudius chuckled to see them.

‘What a little family we are,’ he said. ‘I should have this painted or made into a tapestry. “A household of Rome”, perhaps.’

‘I imagine Messalina would have something to say about it,’ Agrippina said lightly. She threw back her head and laughed at the very idea, then yawned, turning her hands into herself like a kitten. Claudius had remarked on that before and she saw his delight. He always said how unaware she was, how adorable. He was an innocent in some ways, Agrippina thought.

‘As for the galleys . . . I wish I could, my dear,’ he said after a time. ‘I should not say anything, but . . . well, you are trustworthy, I know. I will not be here next month, not if everything goes well.’ He leaned forward like a child telling a secret, his pleasure clear. ‘The invasion of Britannia

is ready, poised to leap across that grey channel. Unlike those little ships you mentioned, I will take a real one to the coast of Gaul. My army waits to embark there – and it is no testing force, Agrippina. Julius Caesar thought only to make a landing and march a little way inland. He had only the records of Pytheas and a few scouts to guide him. Of course, I have his own words and records of imperial mapmakers and archivists.’

Agrippina tried to be interested, though she knew he could rattle on for an hour if the subject interested him, citing sources in Greek as easily as Latin. She was certain, though, that Messalina wouldn’t conceal her boredom. With that in mind, Agrippina hung on his words as if they were from the oracle at Delphi.

‘That is marvellous,’ she breathed. ‘A whole new territory.’

‘A wealth of slaves, tin. There are even stories of gold mines in the west, of ancient stones. White horses, stags, huge bears, wolves the size of men. Mountains and great rivers, Agrippina, all for the taking. A thousand wonders, I am sure. But more than anything, it means we are an empire. The coast of Gaul is not our natural boundary, not if I conquer Britannia! Those islands lie on the very edge of the world, but I will cross to them. I will show the shades of your brother and Tiberius, Agrippina. I will do something they could not.’

She reached out and patted him on the ankle, just above his sandal. He noticed the touch and blushed.

‘I know you will,’ she said as he looked at her. Of course, he would think she had no idea how catlike her painted eyelids made her look. She had sought out the actor who had lodged with Domitia Lepida. He had applied the lines

in grey and black, just for this meeting. The dress too that had been sewn to her shape, to flatter and appeal to a man's eye. The hair that cascaded down her back in curls, suggesting wildness, calling on a man to try and tame her. No, it was all natural, of course, all an accident.

She felt his eyes on her and then the moment was ruined by the clack of legion boots on marble.

'Majesty, may I announce Legate Aulus Plautius . . .' his steward said, bowing deeply.

Claudius rose from his chair, letting a stack of scrolls fall, bouncing on the rug. For his part, the legion general stepped smartly over and dropped to one knee, rising quickly. He looked as Agrippina thought a general should, with a tanned, seamed face, close-cropped white hair and a plumed helmet he carried under his arm.

'I am sorry to call at this hour, Majesty,' the man said. He glanced at Agrippina and stared at the children rolling around on that carpet.

'I need very little sleep, my friend,' Claudius said. The emperor clapped the larger man on the shoulder and if it seemed odd or awkward, the general gave no sign that he thought so.

Claudius caught himself as he was turning the man with slight pressure.

'Ah . . . Agrippina. Would you mind looking after Octavia and little Tiberius? There are a thousand things still to be done, decisions to be made, from the transports for horses, to portable forges, the price of barley, honey, meat for the men . . .'

He would have gone on, but Agrippina smiled and held up a hand.

'I will look after them. Don't worry, Claudius.'

Claudius nodded like a bird, continuing to talk as he walked the Roman general away. In their absence, Agrippina wondered if the woman would come any closer. She hoped so. Messalina had been careful in recent months, almost as if she had developed a sense of danger, or perhaps been warned. There were always those in the palace staff who would seek to find favour with a word dropped into the right ear. Agrippina had done so herself, after all. She was sure Messalina had those loyal to her.

She heard light footsteps clicking across the floor at her back. Agrippina ignored the sound, choosing instead to tickle the feet of the emperor's son, making him giggle.

'My husband has kept you late this evening,' Messalina said. If she hoped to see Agrippina jump or startle, she was disappointed.

'Messalina! I was wondering where you were! Claudius has been called away, I'm afraid. He works himself so hard, but his sense of duty . . . it is typical of him, I think. My brother Nero was just the same when we were young, you know. Men like those two take the weight of the whole world on their shoulders, but always willingly. I know this new campaign will be a triumph . . . but there, I have said too much. I should know better, Messalina.'

Agrippina rose to her feet, tapping one finger across her lips as if to seal them. Messalina was younger than she was – and a little shorter. It was hard to assess another woman's beauty, but her skin was good and the green dress worked well with her dark brown eyes. Still, she seemed to be chewing one corner of her lip, as if there was such a fury in her it could only consume itself.

'You don't need to worry about keeping secrets,' Messalina replied. 'My husband shares all his plans with me.'

She knew Agrippina was baiting her, but she still had to speak. The woman was a wasp, stinging and then flying off without a care. For once, Messalina had her alone, without Claudius or anyone else listening. Or only the children. She glanced at Lucius, seeing a thickset little boy trying to push coins with his nose and laughing. Messalina curled her lip.

‘I see your son is still exploring the world,’ she said. ‘I heard he took his father’s chariot and almost broke his neck. Claudius said he might easily have been killed.’

That barb was too sharp from one who had sent black-smearing men into a child’s rooms. Agrippina felt her blood go cold. It was a huge effort to force a smile to her lips.

‘Lucius leads a charmed life, dear. Ever since he survived that snake in his room. Do you see the bracelet he wears? Come to me, Lucius. Let Messalina see what I gave you.’

The boy rose and held up a deeply tanned arm. On his wrist, Messalina could see a glittering band of what looked like gold and glass. At the surface, coloured snakeskin shimmered, catching the light of the lamps.

‘I had it made from the skin of the snake that saved him,’ Agrippina said. ‘As a symbol of good luck and the gods’ own blessings. Is it not beautiful?’

‘It is,’ Messalina said. In that moment, she wanted it for herself, but knew better than to ask. She was the emperor’s wife. If she admired a piece of jewellery on the wife of a senator or consul, the woman would unclasp it and hand it over. There were times when she didn’t dare comment on an ugly piece, in case she became its owner. Somehow, she didn’t think Agrippina would be so accommodating.

‘I only hope he has not used up all his luck,’ Messalina murmured, almost to herself.

She didn't see Agrippina make a claw at her back, as if she might strike and tear at those dark eyes. Lucius returned to the baby and Octavia. For a time, the two women watched their children crawl and play together.

'I was sorry to hear about your husband,' Messalina said. 'To lose a second, so soon after the first! A tragedy. If that's your family's luck, I don't want any part of it.'

'It was a sad day,' Agrippina said. 'A man of strength, full of life, yet brought down in an instant. One small bone lodged in his throat was all it took. It makes me shiver to think of it. How fragile we all are! How death looms unseen, even in the midst of life! But oh, my dear, you know that only too well.'

Messalina looked confused and Agrippina leaned in, dropping her voice to a whisper.

'It is brave of you, my dear, to stand here as if nothing is wrong. I heard Claudius sent men to confront your friend. My memory! Italus told me his name, but it won't come.'

The words rocked the younger woman. She took a step back and Agrippina thought she might actually race out. It seemed her lover was more precious to her than anyone had known.

'I've done nothing wrong . . .' Messalina said. Her eyes darted across her children, loath to leave them in the care of an enemy, but desperate to leave.

'I know that, of course! Who can blame you for taking comfort in the arms of another during dark years? Perhaps Claudius is one of those who doesn't care who lies in your bed. He is so busy with his books and campaigns, I know that. I tell you, Messalina, you are a lucky woman if that is so. Most men are jealous – and violent in that

jealousy. If my Italus had ever seen one of the imperial staff eyeing me . . . ?

Messalina made a sound like a cat's yowl and ran from the room. Agrippina watched her go, feeling the thrill of victory.

'Run to his arms, you bitch,' she muttered. She saw her son was watching her and sat down with him once again. The baby had seen his mother leave and began to squall. Agrippina picked up little Tiberius and rocked him, but he would not be comforted.

It had to be a trap, Messalina was almost sure. She had seen spite in Agrippina. Unless it was just her pleasure in having Messalina at her mercy. Not that she could blame her, not really. There was only one thing worse than striking at a woman's child – and that was striking at her child and missing. If Agrippina had guessed she was responsible, if she even suspected, she would be an implacable enemy. Messalina understood that. If their positions were reversed, she would move heaven and earth.

Two praetorians fell into step at her back as she reached the outer part of the imperial precinct. Messalina wanted to dismiss them, but it would have looked suspicious and she was not certain they would even obey her. The emperor's wife could not go out alone into the city after dark. The night sheltered her, hid her fears from sight, but her husband would skin any man who let her be hurt.

Instead, she fretted as a carriage was brought, though it meant delay she could hardly bear and more servants to gossip and report on where she went. She gave Pompey's theatre as her destination. She and Vinicius had met there a score of times, standing on the very spot where Julius

Caesar had been killed, a great stag brought down by dogs. It was a place where she could leave her personal servants outside and lose herself in the entrances and exits, finding her way to a little house just one street away – and the arms of the man she loved.

She cursed under her breath as the carriage trundled slowly along stone streets. The driver snapped his whip ahead of him to clear the road, allowing no delay. Yet his pace was gentle, as befitted a noble passenger. She would not be bruised by the trip across the city, but she could feel frustration build. She could *run* faster than this slow, wheeled thing!

He would not be in the theatre that night, of course. She was so careful not to be seen, not even to catch his eye in public if they met by chance. Three and twelve nights after the full moon, they might visit in his little house. He would come to the theatre on those nights and stand in the shadows, waiting for her. He understood how careful she had to be. Their courtship had been gentle and delicate, for years so fragile it might have been nothing at all. While Caligula had descended into savage madness, they had found comfort in one another – a young wife and the master mapmaker for the praetorians.

Messalina could still remember the way he smiled when she had first asked his name. How he had understood how wondrous and strange it was, to have something grow from nothing between them.

As she trundled through dark streets, Messalina knew she would never have dared to love him in a normal year. The truth of Caligula's court was that they lived with death, with something dark breathing on them every waking hour and all the night. Some of them had broken and

incurred his wrath; others withered away. Still more found themselves worn down, making decisions they would never have made without months and years of strain, without despair and fear and hot tears. It was not an excuse, she told herself. She had chosen to go to Vinicius, to his bed. For months afterwards, she had been terrified of a hand on her shoulder, of a grim praetorian stepping out of the shadows. It had not come, and like a change of seasons, she had slipped into another life, where Vinicius was her lover, and she his country wife.

She had never spent the night with him, but she had drowsed in his arms a thousand times, then returned to her husband. Claudius had never made her heart beat, her flesh sing. When he rolled on top of her, there was none of the gasping wonder she felt with Vinicius. Yet he too had survived the years of terror – and somehow, Claudius had risen to rule the world.

The carriage drew to a halt and she looked up at the lighted windows of the theatre. There was a play already begun and she could hear the voices of actors declaiming lines of one long dead. One of the praetorians had clung to a step behind her seat the whole way, enduring the cold air without complaint. He stepped down to open her door, bowing deeply.

‘I will go in alone,’ she said. He hesitated, clearly uncomfortable. ‘I just want to fetch a playbill for next week,’ she went on.

‘I’d be happy to get one for you,’ he said.

She smiled, though she cursed his willingness to help.

‘There’s no need,’ she began.

‘Domina, it would be my honour . . .’

‘There’s no need,’ she said, her voice sharpening. If it

was all a trap, this man knew nothing, or was another actor worthy of the theatre before her. 'I will go. Wait here for me.'

She raised her cowl and entered the theatre without another word, leaving the praetorian to wave off the attentions of a single guard on the door.

Messalina stepped into light and stood still, lines washing over her. The play was *Orestes*, one of the great tragedies. After so long using the theatre as her excuse, she knew them all – at least enough to convince her husband if he ever asked. She saw the man playing the lead tear his clothes on the stage, holding out bloody hands to the audience. It felt like a poor omen. She shook her head as she made her way along the row, heading for another door she knew led to the street. In hood and cloak, she would vanish into the evening gloom.

The audience was gripped as Orestes cried out his great line: 'I see the calm after the storm.' Messalina did not stop. She passed through the dark and reached the little way out she had used so many times. She did not look back that evening and so missed the pair of dark figures making their way to the same spot, their focus unwavering.

In the street outside, she felt free. It was not empty and she knew she took a risk in the dark. She wore jewellery that would make her a target for any thief – and there were other threats to a young woman walking the streets, at least where drunks and scoundrels made their way to bed. Messalina gritted her teeth and went on, hurrying across the road on flat stones and then along a walkway to the house she knew. It was the same as always: painted wood with a square cut to look out at whoever knocked.

She tapped on it, glancing up and down the street. It

was not one of their nights and she was not even sure he would be in. There was no one paying her any attention that she could see. She felt her heart pounding as she waited, willing the door to open. When it did, she almost fell inside, flooded with relief.

Claudius appeared once again before dawn. He yawned as he passed through to his bed, then paused. The fire had burned out and the room was chill. Agrippina lay on a couch with three children curled up with her. His daughter's floppy little arm was draped across her neck and either woman or child was snoring. He saw Agrippina had propped the baby up on cushions. Tiberius too was asleep, though he snuffled and moved even as Claudius looked on them.

On an impulse, he crossed the room and eased onto the couch, his hip right on the edge. Agrippina woke.

'Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to fall asleep.'

She struggled to sit up and the children too began to wake. Claudius felt a twinge of irritation at having ruined so perfect a scene. The thought of her leaving was suddenly unpleasant. He spoke quickly, words pouring from him.

'Agrippina, I've been th-thinking. How would you f-feel about coming to B-Britannia with me? You wouldn't b-be in any d-danger, I promise you. I'll have half the p-praetorians as my personal g-guard.'

She sat up, taking his hands in hers.

'Are you sure? What about your children? I could bring Lucius with me, of course.'

'I suppose they are too y-young for such a j-journey,' he said. The glorious idea, of sharing his campaign with

another, was still glowing in him. He did not want her to refuse.

‘And Messalina? I can’t believe she would be happy about it.’

‘Messalina has no interest . . . i-in m-my work,’ he said. ‘She c-can look after Octavia and little T-T-T . . .’ The boy’s name defeated him, and Agrippina had to wait patiently for him to spit the word ‘*Tiberius!*’ The sound woke the child, who began to rub one eye and wail, making Claudius wince.

‘Where is my w-wife? You should not have been left to t-tend the children alone, Agrippina. By the g-gods, I have a thousand s-servants for this sort of work!’

His raised voice brought two of them running in. He gestured to his son and daughter and they were borne away to be fed and washed.

‘But you will c-come, Agrippina? You do w-want to?’ he asked.

In truth, she could imagine few things that would be more of a trial than listening to his theories and plans on a long voyage. She had only the vaguest sense of the coast of Italy and Gaul, but it was all very far away – with the gods alone knew what privations and miseries she would have to endure. Yet she breathed and pressed his hand to her lips.

‘I would love it,’ she said.

PART THREE

AD 43

22

The galley swooped and crashed on a grey sea. Agrippina was hanging over the stern, a pale shadow of the woman she had been. Her only comfort was that Claudius had joined her on the other side. Like her, the emperor was securely tied on so he could not fall overboard. He was an odd shade of grey-green in his sea illness. She had no way of knowing if she looked as much like a corpse as he did, and after a while she could no longer care.

Lucius, of course, had only scorn for weakness in all its forms. He thought it was some sort of failure of will and told his mother to stop embarrassing him in front of the crew. That stung almost as much as the bitter vomit that came flooding out whenever she tried to keep something down. At least her son had the sense to stay clear of an emperor with the same malaise. Lucius watched them both in stern judgement, but gave advice only to his mother.

Claudius had been intent on taking ship all the way around Hispania to the northern coast of Gaul. Agrippina had seen the route on maps of exquisite detail, though the

reality was vastly different. The world was simply bigger than she had known. Mountainous shores crept past endlessly, with no more sign of life on their flanks than an occasional shepherd's hut or wild hares frolicking. She had been assured it would be no more than two months at sea. The journey overland was apparently only a third of the distance, but Claudius did not like to ride. It was hard not to curse his name when she thought of that.

She looked over the stern to where two more galleys battled against the swell. The wind had risen and they too had raised sail and shipped oars inboard. There seemed to be a constant battle between gales and crews at sea. In still waters, they heaved oars back and forth, but the men grew exhausted in the labour. The wind in the right direction let them rest for a time, unless of course it freshened and grew too strong. The sails came down then and the oarsmen raced to some sheltering cove to wait it out.

Agrippina stood and breathed, her eyes closed. She no longer cared if the oars were in or out, the sails up or down. She could hear Claudius groaning and did not respond. Whatever fragile thing might be coming to life between them would not be aided in its birth by the way they looked then, she was certain. With the emperor leaning on the rail, all she could see was his great balding head, shining with sweat or spray. He was determined to be part of the campaign he had planned, to go in with the elite legions he had gathered on the northern coast of Gaul. Agrippina thought he was obsessed with it, and yet his motivation was clear enough. He'd spent his entire life being the one other men mocked. This was his response – and he wanted her to witness it, to show all those who had dismissed him as a useless, stuttering fool.

Agrippina had heard numbers of ships and men that astonished her. It brought back memories of her own childhood in army camps. Her brothers had raced about then just as Lucius did. With her father in command and brothers ready to fight anyone who looked at her the wrong way, she had felt safe, she remembered. It hadn't lasted. Her father had died, almost certainly from poison. Her mother had been blinded and sent to exile after that. Agrippina could not remember feeling safe again, not as she had then.

She heard a high voice start one of the rowing chants, though she could not pin down the location. Lucius, of course. Agrippina had to squint as she looked up. They had come close to shore and in its sheltering arms, the sea was calming. She actually felt a little better with the boat's roll easing. Even the darker memories of Pontia and the journey to and from exile could not spoil the rise in mood it brought. She sought out the figure of her son, the little bull of a boy. His summer tan was so deep he seemed to be made of leather or polished wood.

Lucius had climbed to the point of the single mast again. Though the sails had come down, he climbed those ropes like a Barbary ape and the crew loved him for it. They were hard men, whether they laboured at the oars or bore iron and bronze to protect the emperor. Yet the sight of a fearless boy leaping around on the spar made them smile and laugh. Half a dozen of them had come to her to say how proud she should be, while she could only lean and stare at the passing waves.

Now, Lucius sang. She shaded her eyes with one hand. The mast was too far to call him down, which may have been half the reason he loved it up there. He could always

pretend not to have heard. Left with no other option, Agrippina made herself smile.

When Lucius came down, the men would ruffle his hair and pat him on the shoulder. Some of them would give him a little hard bread, as he was always starving. Perhaps they hoped to gain favour with his mother, or the emperor himself – but she thought not. Lucius had a way with soldiers. Hard men who could butcher a sheep or an enemy with the same lack of emotion seemed to like a boy who grinned at them and asked a thousand questions. Her son was already a miniature man, she thought, sticking his lip out when he was annoyed, standing with his fists clenched when one of them challenged him. They loved that, the praetorians. One of them had given him a little knife and he'd sharpened it to a razor, then carved his initials with it in half a dozen places. Agrippina glanced at Claudius. Perhaps it was just as well the emperor had been lost in his seasickness for a time. She wanted him to like Lucius, but of all the men there, she thought her scholarly uncle would not take easily to him.

The shore was shingle, a vast stretch of tumbled stones that led to green hills beyond. The white-topped sea lay outside the arms of the bay and Agrippina heard the oars come out and plunge in perfect strokes, forcing the ship faster towards the land.

Someone whistled for Lucius to come down, but the boy ignored it and the beach seemed to leap closer. Agrippina gestured to her son to hold on, but it was too late. She grabbed the rudder housing with all her strength as the galley's prow struck.

It was not the crash she had expected. The sharp keel split the shingle, peeling it back in waves. There were

shudders that threw men from their feet, but the ship was unstoppable, a weight of bronze, wood and men that even the shore could only slow.

Agrippina watched in wonder as the great ship slid up and up, then came to a rest at last. There was a moment of breathless silence, then a long creak as it began to lean. The men did not cheer until they were sure they wouldn't be tipped out onto the land.

Claudius had to gesture to be untied. He wiped his hair back from his head and she saw his colour too was returning. He noticed her questioning expression and nodded grimly.

'There is a road heading n-north from here, my dear. It will serve my p-purpose, better than the sh-shh . . . ships. We'll stretch our legs for a time to reach it, then fetch horses. It will be f-faster than going on by sea, I do not doubt.'

Agrippina had the words to reply without having to think.

'In truth, I am relieved,' she called to him. 'I can see you are getting strong again, but my stomach still rebels. I don't think I could bear another week on board, never mind two months.'

The reality of him being tied to the stern seemed to vanish in his memory as she spoke. He smiled at her.

'I'm glad I could ease you, Agrippina. What is the p-point of being emperor if the world doesn't d-dance to my command?'

She nodded. He was neither handsome nor physically strong. Nor was he brave, apparently, as far as she could tell. Yet somehow he still managed to be vain. It was extraordinary. He seemed to expect she would believe he had

chosen that cove for its closeness to a road. Still, she smiled. If she had learned anything in her life, it was to flatter power. Claudius could be ruthless, but he was not Tiberius. She found herself trembling as the wind returned to snag damp robes. Nor was he the monster her brother had become, driven mad by grief and horrors.

Claudius came to her side, his fingers working the knots that still held her in place. They were crusted in salt, she saw, but he tugged and pulled nimbly enough, his scholar's hands finding a use. She tapped him twice on the arm in thanks. He beamed at her.

'Lugdunum is b-barely a week from this spot. We have landed in a f-fine place, Agrippina, with the highest m-mountains all to the east. When we reach the road, I will find you a c-carriage, my dear. You and Lucius will be able to rest then.'

He and his niece climbed down from the prow, using steps and ropes and the waiting arms of praetorians. Agrippina felt the shingle sway under her, then settle. Lucius had climbed down from the mast, breathless with all he had seen and felt. She wanted to strangle him as he chattered and laughed, but even Claudius smiled, unless it was just his sickness fading. Agrippina looked back at the three ships that had beached themselves, all disgorging men and equipment in what looked like calm order.

'Will they go on now without us?' she said.

Claudius nodded, peering at them.

'I will tell the c-captains. They will meet us on the shore of G-Gaul, my dear. I'll need everything that f-floats then, to take my legions across.'

Agrippina hid the disappointment she felt. Though she loved horses, the journey he described was surely a trial

compared to being on board a galley, no matter how her stomach protested. That would have passed in just another day or two, she was certain. She saw Claudius was looking to her, waiting for something. There was no debate, not really. Her place was at his side, as close as she could get.

‘I’m just glad to be on land again,’ she said. ‘I thought I would surely die on that ship.’

‘Women can be rather f-frail,’ Claudius said with pleasure. ‘But I will l-look after you. You are in my c-care, Agrippina. You are my f-family, after all.’

She smiled, wondering how long it would be before it was her sickness alone that had prompted the change of route. She reached out and tapped him on the arm again, seeing him calm.

‘Lead the way,’ she said. Despite her words, she strode off up the shore, leaving Claudius behind. ‘Lucius!’ she called without looking back. ‘With me. Come on. This is . . . *a great adventure.*’

She said the last to herself, through gritted teeth. The taste of sweetness was in her mouth, and for a time she could not bear it.

By the time the sun set that evening, something like order had been restored. Claudius had disembarked two full cohorts of praetorians, a thousand men of his personal guard. They had marched to the road as if they were trying to stamp the dunes into submission. From there, they had sent runners up and down the paved stones, announcing the emperor’s presence in Gaul and summoning horses and supplies. It helped that they had reached settled Roman territory. Only Hispania had been part of the empire for longer. The roads themselves were well made and drained

there, with Roman way stations every twenty-five miles and decent towns to buy supplies.

Agrippina accepted a scout pony for herself, a snorting little mare that could ride all day and never seem to tire. She had called Lucius to sit behind her and he had thrown a tantrum that had embarrassed his mother in front of everyone. Even the praetorians had blushed for him, though he was past caring. After that, Agrippina would have made him walk across Gaul, but Claudius had offered him one of the smaller geldings and she'd had to smile and nod her thanks. The little boy had watched his mother warily all the next day, knowing her rather better than the emperor. Lucius was on his best behaviour, suspecting rightly that his mother would welcome a chance to beat him.

The mystery of why he had chosen to go by ship became a lot clearer when she saw Claudius ride. Though his men selected a great gentle carthorse for him, he still sat like a sack of grain as it ambled along, with reins so loose the animal began to crop grass, snatching it as they went so the emperor lurched and almost fell forward. It made Agrippina wince to see such a poor horseman, but she supposed it was better than heaving his guts into the roaring sea.

Whatever the emperor was used to, his praetorians had the routines of a long march ingrained in them. They stopped at the same times each day, as if their legs and stomachs would not carry them a step further. Food was procured from every station on the road and if it was plain fare at first, they collected chickens and rabbits, sending men out to scout and hunt ahead while the rest marched or rode. Agrippina thought they were making good time. She gave up her little mare after three days, leaving it

behind to be fed oats and rested. Her second horse was a little older and too placid, but to her pleasure, Lucius was given a beast that would not stop, no matter what he did. If he wished to walk, it trotted. If he preferred to trot, it cantered or galloped. Each time they stepped off the road to eat or sleep, he was carried on into the distance, returning to camp hours after the rest. He had to jump down then and take the reins in both hands, wrapping them around a sapling to halt the skittish beast. He made a game of it, of course, calling out to his mates in the praetorians to watch. Agrippina only frowned at him, still annoyed at how he used the emperor's presence to get his way.

The one who changed the most on that ride north was Claudius himself. He still rode with visible discomfort. She'd heard him ask one of the praetorian officers for unguents when his parts grew sore. The change was more in his manner than his physical state. On a Roman road, he became once more the hub of a wheel. Riders from ahead and behind approached their group at all hours, hard-faced, spare little men who had ridden for days, changing horses at every opportunity. The emperor was no longer alone, but spun threads fore and aft in a way that had been impossible at sea.

On the evening of the sixth day, Agrippina saw Claudius was heading off for a walk. She had a suspicion he applied goose grease to himself while he was away from camp. Lucius had reported one of the men saying how the emperor suffered from piles. They didn't guard their words around the boy the way they did in the company of a woman, which was oddly irritating to her. Still, there had been few opportunities to speak to her uncle over the previous week. She wanted to remind him she was there.

‘Claudius!’ she called. She ignored the grimace that crossed his face, quickly hidden. He could grease his nethers in his own time, or whatever it was. ‘May I walk with you? It is such a beautiful evening.’

‘Of course, my d-dear,’ he said.

In fact, the day had been sweltering and the cooler evening was a blessed relief. He accepted her arm in his and if she heard the clink of a metal pot in his pouch, she ignored it.

‘How are the preparations going?’ she asked, immediately annoyed with herself. She didn’t care about that. Still, his expression eased as he answered her.

‘Well enough, I b-believe. I’ll be p-pleased to reach Lugdunum and have a chance to b-*bathe*. Of course, we are far from the g-gathering coast – too far. The days sit heavily on me, I admit.’ He eyed her from the side then, judging her reaction. ‘I want to order the attack, to see f-four great legions spring to violence. Twenty th . . . thousand men, Agrippina.’ She did not seem impressed, so he went on. ‘With the auxiliaries – Syrians, G-Greeks, m-men of Thrace – there must be another twenty th-thousand there. With all the armourers and smiths, it must be an army of f-fifty thousand.’

‘All waiting on your word,’ she said, understanding what he needed to hear.

He nodded happily.

‘Men, horses, chariots, sh-ships – all waiting for m-me to arrive and drop my hand. I have g-gathered a city, Agrippina, in that place. I have fed and c-clothed them through an entire winter, waiting for spring and the order to l-launch. I tell you, it will be glorious when it comes. B-Britannia has rich black soil, an ocean full of f-fish and

oysters. They already trade with us now, but I will have it all. That land will feed the empire, Agrippina, while their slaves will work our mines and serve families in Rome, Athens, Jerusalem. New lands, new wealth . . .’

He paused, glancing at her as if unsure whether to go on. She smiled and tapped him on the arm. He breathed.

‘Perhaps new titles, Agrippina. Your father – my brother – was granted a great honour by the senate. They named him “Germanicus” when he won half a dozen victories in that troublesome realm.’ Claudius hesitated, lost in memory. ‘He rejoiced in it, as I recall. Oh, I felt such envy then! The world called my brother Germanicus and it was as if the name brought forth the man. The senate made him proconsul of all Germania and Gaul, in command of six full legions. He won battles there that will never be forgotten, claiming those dark forests for the empire. If he had lived, he would have become emperor, I am certain. By Jupiter, I love . . . I loved him. I looked up to him, Agrippina.’

‘I was just a little girl, but I remember,’ she said softly.

For some reason, his expression changed, souring.

‘You take after your mother, Agrippina. Her name and her face. I *never* see him when I look at you.’ Could he be envious of his brother still? He disappointed her.

The silence stretched as they walked. It was natural enough for her to remove her arm as they came to a rocky part of the trail. Claudius held out his hand, but she didn’t seem to see it.

‘If a man can win a title like Germanicus for his son, perhaps I can do as much for mine . . .’ he said. She turned to him then. ‘I thought if this campaign goes well, I might . . . Is it bad luck to say a name before it is earned?’

‘I don’t think so,’ she said, though it was. Still, she wanted to hear.

He nodded, pleased with himself.

‘Britannicus, then,’ he said. His stammer had vanished, she noticed. ‘If I can take and hold Britannia, I will give my son a name fit for an emperor, in honour of it.’

‘Not yourself, then?’

Claudius waved a hand. Somehow she knew the stammer would return before she heard it.

‘I am too s-set in my ways, my dear. My son will rejoice in it, as my brother loved Germanicus. A n-name earned in war and glory – in t-tin and slaves and oysters, Agrippina! Is it not a joyous p . . . p-prospect?’

She patted him on the arm, letting him rest from his struggle. She could see the frustration it brought to him. In its own way, perhaps it was admirable.

‘It is,’ she said.

She saw the emperor was shifting his weight. Her husband Barbo had complained of piles on occasion. He’d said they itched like ambition, which was typical of the man. It was tempting to keep Claudius there in conversation, unable to apply his grease to soothe himself. The thought of his son becoming a great emperor with a name like her father’s did not sit well with her. Claudius was right – her father *should* have become princeps in Rome. His children should have been the ones to wear purple or the golden laurel leaves! And of course as Agrippina was the last one standing, she would have had the world at her feet. Instead, she was there, sore-footed and weary, somewhere in Gaul, forced to smile at a bald and stammering little man who could ride neither wave nor beast. She could almost hear the gods laugh and it did not please her.

‘I think I will . . . p-pray for a while,’ Claudius said. ‘Alone, I think. You’ll be quite safe on your return. My p-praetorians have all these tracks under guard.’

He shifted once again, squeezing his buttocks together. Agrippina dipped to one knee, then left him alone with his little pot. She heard him groan when she was some way off and shuddered to herself, imagining the scene.

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At Lugdunum, the marching column took on new horses and lost a day for Claudius to bathe and be tended by local physicians. The city was small in comparison to Rome, but it was nonetheless a city. Agrippina had never visited before, but it had a river and markets, a bath-house and a small amphitheatre. The gladiators there would never fight to the death, only to first blood. Yet there was pride in the emperor's presence among the people. The entire population turned out to line the roads: men, women and children taking the day off work to see the one whose face was stamped on their coins. Claudius was in his element. He had brought chests of new silver sesterces – and he did not stint in that place. He even visited a small mint there and lent his official seal to their labour as a mark of imperial favour. The owner was in tears of joy over that, Agrippina observed.

A better carriage was found for her, lined with cushions and protected from rain with an awning. Claudius climbed in beside her as they left Lugdunum on the second day. She looked at him with sympathy. The praetorians had been

present for the doctor's examination. They'd reported piles like angry red grapes, and of course Lucius had heard and then exaggerated the size of them to his horrified mother. She was no longer surprised when Claudius shifted in his seat, nor that he preferred carriage to horseback.

Crowds cheered as the column moved off once more.

'They love you here,' she said. 'Though I suppose we have left a great number of silver coins behind.'

'It's a little m-more than that,' he said. 'I was born in Lugdunum, Agrippina. Did your father not say? I was born in G-Gaul, just as you were born in Germania. I remember how pleased your f-father was, after three boys. He wanted a d-daughter and you came like an answer to prayer. We are b-both army children, dear. Children of empire. Though of Roman blood, of course. L-Like you, I am a descendant of Augustus and, through him, Julius Caesar. Now, Caesar claimed d-descent from Venus herself – and was granted the right to be worshipped.' He took her hand. 'There is a t-tincture of greatness in our line, Agrippina. If you can look hard enough to s-see it. If you can see me.'

She wondered if he thought he was being subtle. Not that she had ever known the more delicate games between lovers. Neither her first husband nor her second had been much given to sighs or promises. Agrippina preferred not to inflame a man who had complete power over her, but he seemed to need something.

'I try,' she said faintly. 'Though you must know . . . I have known so much grief, Claudius.'

He nodded, pressing her hand to his lips and kissing her fingers with great solemnity. It had the feel of an oath, and she was still not certain what she had agreed. He did not speak again until they rested for the noon meal. His

praetorians had arranged the services of women from Lugdunum and they had food bubbling over a fire in no time at all. Agrippina saw Lucius appear at the carriage side, startling her as he grinned.

‘I see you are happy,’ she said.

He nodded.

‘Not the only one,’ he said. ‘Letters came in, a big packet of them. News from Rome. Uncle Claudius looks cheerful about something.’

She looked across to the tent raised for the emperor. It had been a far more spartan arrangement before Lugdunum. Even now, it was not what Claudius might expect in normal times. Yet the floor was of polished wooden boards laid on cloth. Oil burned in lamps and a brazier warmed walls of thick felt and a wooden frame, with a smoke hole over all. It was not as comfortable as his cabin on board ship, but then he hadn’t seen much of that. Agrippina slept in a smaller one or often the carriage itself, making herself comfortable on the cushions. Lucius snored under it each night, happy enough in his little camp.

In that moment, Claudius stood before his command tent, reading page after page of letters. He thrived on the sort of details that would drive another man mad, she thought. The labours of the empire passed between his fingers, from laws in the senate to boxes of iron nails and the spoil of mines. He read it all and if it was weeks out of date, he still spent part of each morning writing imperial orders and sending those out. The city was with him as they headed north. Even on the road, he was still Rome.

The Palatine was quiet in the emperor’s absence. It was as if part of the bustle of thousands of his staff was for his

benefit rather than serving any purpose of its own. With Claudius on campaign, all Rome seemed to have eased itself into a more comfortable position, after too long cramped.

Messalina settled into the cushions of private rooms. The suite was almost on the far side of where she usually roamed and she did not know them well, or their current occupant. She could see traces of Prefect Naevius Macro in the simple furniture and bare walls. It was hard to predict the behaviour of a man from so very little, she thought. She knew he had been head of the vigiles in Rome, appointed to his current role by Emperor Tiberius, confirmed in it by Gaius, the one they still called Caligula. The praetorians were tight-lipped about the past. Beyond a few things she knew for certain, all she had were whispers.

The sense of danger was almost a physical thing. She could not escape it, not in a man's private rooms. It didn't matter if they were more an office for his position as prefect of the praetorians rather than a private home. It was still uncomfortable. She leaned back on a couch and waited alone for a man. No married woman was truly free to do so, not even the emperor's wife. She grimaced at the thought. Danger loomed on all sides, with her foolish husband making cow eyes at his niece. She had pitied Claudius when he was bullied and thrashed in the court of Caligula. He had been sport for emperors and she had comforted him in his humiliation. Now, she only hated him, for his weakness, for his pointless interests and his stammer.

Naevius Macro approached his rooms, sandals clicking on polished stone. She heard him halt outside, waiting through a murmur of voices. His own servants would be telling him she was present, of course, giving him time to

arrange his thoughts, to decide how best to address the wife of his master.

He swept in, short and wide at the shoulder. Without a word, Naeivius Macro knelt to her on powerful legs, dipping and rising in perfect balance.

‘Domina, I was not told you had honoured me with a visit. I’m sorry, I would have come sooner if I had known.’

‘I didn’t tell anyone . . .’ she said.

He frowned as if her voice annoyed him. Men didn’t frown at Agrippina like that! No, that one just blinked away an imaginary tear and men became blushing boys. Messalina touched a finger to her own eyelashes, dark with kohl. There were no tears there either, but it didn’t hurt.

‘Domina, is there something wrong? What can I do for you?’

‘I would speak to Claudius, but my husband has abandoned me,’ she said, trying to keep the bitterness from her voice. Men recoiled from that, she knew. ‘He has gone to Gaul, while I remain here with the children. I have a few friends in the city, but if I go out to them . . . I believe I am followed.’

‘Followed? Domina, I have command of the praetorians. If there were orders to follow the wife of the emperor, I would know of them. You have a personal guard, of course. The emperor may have given orders to keep you safe. He has many clients, domina . . .’ He thought for a moment.

‘You are loyal,’ she murmured. She leaned closer to him. ‘I heard that from a friend we have in common, one of your own mapmakers.’

She did not name Vinicius, but she could see he knew. There had been no *need* to keep her lover a secret when Claudius had been a laughing stock, the court fool for

Caligula! Only now, when tides of men had raised him up, beyond anything he deserved. The gods could be cruel in their humour.

‘Our *friend* told me you were there, Naevius, when Tiberius passed on, when he crossed the river to Elysium.’

The prefect’s face hardened. She could see the muscle in his jaw standing out.

‘I’m sure I don’t know anything about that, domina. Emperor Tiberius was very ill and had been so for many months. His passing was not a gentle thing.’

‘And you were loyal then, to Gaius Caesar, to Caligula?’

‘I was, of course, domina. I was his dog and I do not regret it.’

‘But . . . our friend told me he was killed, stabbed in these very corridors, by praetorians. By your men, Naevius.’

‘I didn’t see it. And we *don’t* talk of that night,’ he snapped. His eyes widened as he tried to gentle his tone. ‘I’m sorry, domina. That was a dark time. I did my duty – and I remind you, the praetorians were absolved of all error by your husband. Our reputation is unblemished.’

‘Our friend told me as much . . .’ she said softly. ‘But it gives me hope, Naevius. You have endured much, seen much, but still, you have not risen a step since the death of Sejanus, have you? How many years ago was that? You have been loyal, but I think that rare loyalty has not always earned its reward. I wonder if an offer might be made, Naevius. Senator, consul, estates and fortunes in gold . . . why, a man might ask almost anything at all, if the need was great enough.’

Macro sighed, glancing back at the open doors. His gaze drifted to a jug of wine and the cup he filled when he returned to his rooms each evening. It sat by the open

brazier that warmed his rooms. It would have taken on a little heat by then.

‘Domina, would you like a cup of wine? It is from the village where I was born.’

He touched his mouth as he spoke, running a thumb round the curve of his lips, as if they itched or felt dry. Messalina hesitated. Drinking wine in his rooms would be hard to explain to her husband if it was reported to him. It was far more intimate than simply approaching the prefect of the praetorians on some official task. She shook her head and he nodded, seeming to understand.

Macro crossed to the table and poured his own. He sat then on the edge of the same couch. She could feel the warmth of him, smell clean oil on his skin. For a moment, he was still a soldier, ready to leap up. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes, relaxing.

‘The next watch has begun, domina. It has been . . . a very long day.’

Messalina saw he held the wine cup in his hands before him. It was as if he was drawing out the moment before he drank, teasing himself. She opened her mouth to speak, but he went on.

‘Domina . . . you know I spent fifteen years in the vigiles? I fought both fires and men. Some battles I won and some I lost. You would not believe how destructive fire can be, once it has a hold. If the lads could get there in the first few minutes, we could practically piss it out.’ He opened his eyes, blushing slightly as he recalled his audience. ‘I’m sorry, domina. I forget myself.’

‘Please, Naevius. These are your private rooms, after all. I have heard and seen worse.’

‘Yes. We all have.’

He drank his wine in the way of a man who had been waiting all day to do just that. Messalina saw hunger in him as his eyes flickered back to the jug. She had interrupted a ritual, but one in a man of extraordinary discipline. She was not surprised when Macro rose to refill the cup, nor when the jug seemed to snag in his fingers, so that he brought it back to the couch. He was more mellow in the instant, the sinews in his neck softening.

‘Those fires, though,’ he said. ‘Like rats, they were. If we were called late, or if we were too slow, they crept up into the beams and eaves. All we could do then was take our long poles and pull the walls down into the street. Once the fire forced its way in, you see? We could throw sand all night then and it wouldn’t matter. I saw it spread along a row of roofs once, leaving all below untouched for the longest time. The people came out and they couldn’t understand why we were there, some of them. Yet the fire was spreading and it was only when they saw the smoke rising . . . They knew then, but it was too late.’

He finished his second cup and she saw his teeth had taken on a little of the stain. The hands that filled it once more were steady, but they acted almost as if he wasn’t aware of them, responding to a need while he talked. She was not sure what to make of his gentle slide into drunkenness, nor what it meant for her. A sober man was not always safer than a drunk one, but he could at least respond to reason or threats. She felt fear prickle across her skin.

‘Sejanus was prefect of the praetorians then,’ Macro said.

His voice was a little slurred as he finished the third cup. His nightly ritual was too ingrained for him to resist in her presence, she understood that. She glanced towards the open door. As long as there was a way out . . .

‘When Tiberius heard Sejanus had raised statues to himself, that he had the whole city celebrate his birthday as if he ruled in Rome, well, the old man came home with blood in his eyes. Domina, I saw the fire begin then, all unseen, crackling away in the eaves while we all slept.’

‘You rose though, Naevius. Tiberius raised you to replace Sejanus.’

‘I saw his body torn apart by a mob, domina. I can see it now. I was sent to his house, to fetch his wife and his children . . .’

His eyes were glittering, she saw in horror. Tears threatened to spill down his cheeks. Some men were made sleepy by strong wine; some laughed or wanted to fight the world. It seemed Naevius Macro was one of those who wept over old sins.

‘There was great cruelty in those days, domina,’ he went on, waving his cup. He was definitely slurring, she realised, though the sense of threat had surely diminished. ‘The fire took hold, do you see? When Tiberius died . . . it was a relief.’

He looked sharply at her then, as if she had said something. Messalina leaned closer. She tapped him lightly on his arm, but he seemed oblivious, lost in his memories.

‘There was a morning when I thought the world had been put right, when all the voices of children would be stilled and I would not have to hear them any more. Gaius Caesar was on the throne and I could live a decent life.’ He sneered at his own innocence, shaking his head. ‘I was wrong. The fire was in the eaves and none of us could put it out. I saw more blood in those four years than my entire life before. Do you understand? You were there, domina, at least for some of it. You saw the feasts, the parties, what

happened at them. He was the inferno, domina – and we were all consumed.’

Tears spilled and Messalina struggled to interrupt what felt like a confession. She had come there for help, but she found herself moved by pain far deeper than she had known.

‘I have done a thousand things that make me ashamed,’ Macro said softly. ‘Sins so great I don’t think I will ever be forgiven. I’ll go to a soldier’s death in the end, I don’t doubt – when it’s too much for me. When I do, I know I’ll hear their little voices calling. Sejanus was a fool, but his children . . . were innocents.’

‘You are a loyal man,’ Messalina said, her voice a breath. She had not expected to find a man so broken and burned, so lonely that a few cups of wine would have him pouring out his grief and guilt. She struggled to see a way to reach through his misery, to find a golden thread that might yet save her. ‘That comes at a cost, Naeivus, when you give your honour into the hands of men who do not deserve it. Tiberius was not fit to lead Rome – you know that now. Sejanus was too vain and stupid even to see how much danger he was in. Of course Tiberius moved against him! Of course the example he made was terrible. He might rule now, if not for the way his flesh corrupted and turned against him.’

‘He cried out in the end,’ Macro muttered with savage satisfaction.

Messalina opened her eyes wide, trying to hide the excitement she felt. He *had* been there! Yet Macro was wily, even in his drunkenness. She saw him become aware of her and a sort of sly cunning passed across his face. He shrugged.

‘I hope he suffered,’ she breathed. ‘He deserved to. And I hope Caligula knew something of the same humiliation he visited on me – and a thousand others. These monsters fall, Naevius. Their fires go out and leave only ashes and bitter memories. But they are gone – and another can rise. The sun comes up again. It can be a new day.’

He sighed, holding the bridge of his nose in his free hand.

‘Domina, I am not a fool. I know what you want from me. I’ve tried to explain why I cannot help you. Do you understand? I’ve seen too many fires run out of control. I’ve seen . . . too much blood, too much pain. You have no idea.’

‘I have more of an idea than you will ever know, Naevius. I have a son who will rule after Claudius, a son who will be emperor. Yet my husband . . . Claudius *is* Tiberius in this moment, do you see? He will put me aside and when he does, he will make an ending. I will be like Sejanus’ wife.’ She touched his arm, leaning closer. ‘It doesn’t have to be like that. I could be regent, Naevius, while my son grows. With a man like you to be my strength, with the praetorians, I could bring peace and dignity back to Rome.’

‘Domina, please . . .’ he said.

He tried to rise from the couch and she held his arm, terrified he would shake it off. She had gone too far to take back the words. If he reported what she had said, her life was forfeit. All she could do was press on in desperation, though she saw he had become as a stone.

‘Messalina,’ he said more roughly, his voice hoarse. ‘You and I have survived in this court, in this city, at the feet of three emperors. Do you understand? It’s like the fire in the eaves. We can’t control it. We think we can, but we can’t! It

burns unseen and I will not challenge it again, for anyone. The cost is just too high. Now please, leave me to my wine. I won't tell anyone about this. I can do that much for you. I can be deaf, as if you had not risked my life and yours tonight.'

'If you could speak to Sejanus' wife on the night before she was dragged out into the street, what would you say to her?' Messalina said coldly. 'Would you tell her to leave you to your wine? That there was no fire coming to burn her to ash?'

'I cannot help you,' he said. He stood despite her efforts to hold him in place, his legs too strong. She staggered and he put a hand out to steady her.

'I'm sorry. I really am. My advice is not to give your husband any reason to hurt you.'

'Oh, it's too late for that,' she said.

Her eyes were red as she stood there, helpless and afraid. She had known freedom for a little while, with Claudius on campaign. She had been able to slip through the rows of Pompey's theatre with a song on her lips. The moment she had seen she was being followed had been like falling into ice water. Only one man would have her watched, one man who ruled an empire. She had given Claudius a son. He really didn't need her any more. She left Macro to his drunken weeping, just another broken man on the Palatine. The city seemed to be full of the creatures.

24

Claudius stopped for three days at the town of Lutetia. It was bounded as a fortress on an island in a huge river to the north of Gaul, reached by arched stone bridges. Claudius read the account of Julius Caesar passing through that area to Lucius in the evenings, telling him of the Parisii tribe who had defended it. They'd seen their great stronghold sacked and burned by the legions of the day. Caesar was a ruthless man. A century later, the walls had been remade in stone and new settlements were spreading on the banks of the river. Rome cast a long shadow – and both trade and families were drawn to the peace it brought.

Agrippina loved the place. She purchased local pottery there, with designs she thought would do well in Rome, sending cartloads of the best pieces back down the southern road. Lutetia was part of the empire and so she was able to visit local moneylenders and use her ring seal to draw funds. In return for a generous tithe, they could have their silver returned in Rome.

The local ponies were wiry little beasts. Lucius asked to

be given a pair of them, as well as a chariot. His mother told him he would learn to ride like a member of the nobilitas, not some team from the Circus Maximus. That resulted in him going missing for a day, until one of the praetorians found him trying to walk home. Agrippina had beaten him for frightening her, though he seemed utterly careless of physical pain and only glared while she walloped him. She'd had a praetorian take up the whip when her arms grew tired, with about as much effect.

If not for the battle of wills with her son and the dangers of war looming, it would have been an idyllic time. That spring and summer were gentle and she understood Claudius needed to reach the northern coast and actually launch his invasion before the days began to shorten. Yet for a time, she could almost feel his affection grow for her. Each evening, he would read something so impossibly dull she wanted to scream, but instead nodded along, trying to remain awake. He could be quite short with her if she fell asleep, and she reminded herself he had the power of life and death over every living soul.

She had seen that power demonstrated by her brother Caligula, and she still remembered the cold horror of being sent into exile. To see that will exercised by Claudius when he settled disputes was somehow obscene, as if he wore stolen robes. Yet in every town as they had crossed Gaul, men were brought before him for judgement. Some of them had been waiting in cells for months, lost and forgotten as they awaited an official presence to come amongst them. Whether he was fit for the role or not, Claudius heard all their complaints and ruled on them. He liked Agrippina to be present for those judgements, though he kept Lucius entertained elsewhere.

The men Claudius condemned were killed in a variety of ways – and they were no more or less dead than if he had been Tiberius or Caligula. Agrippina was not surprised by the brutality or their suffering. That was how the world was – she had known that since childhood. Her father was perhaps the greatest man she had ever known, but even he had decimated a legion when they failed to advance with sufficient vigour. One man in ten had been beaten to death by their own camp-mates, with all weapons forbidden. Agrippina remembered climbing onto a roof at the legion barracks, hidden from sight with her brother Nero and Drusilla, determined to see the whole thing. Her sister had buried her face in her dress, but Agrippina had watched to the end. The men had been spattered with droplets of blood, she recalled, fine mists of red that sat in their hair and marked their skins like a tattoo. Their eyes had been dulled by what they had been made to do.

She shrugged at the memories. Life was violence, she had understood that even then. It could come from a clear sky. If you survived, you walked away to heal and plot your revenge. Sometimes, there was little more to it than that.

When she and Lucius passed some criminal rotting in a cage, Agrippina was quite indifferent. Of course, Lucius was fascinated. When her son found one still alive in Lute-tia, he wanted to climb up with a stick to poke the fellow through the bars. Her refusal had led to another fit of yelling and another whipping. Lucius crept out that night from his little bed, she heard later. Local men had found him clinging to the cage like some awful crow, making it swing. They'd returned him to the praetorians when he spoke Latin to them, but they'd muttered prayers to dark gods as they had, touching their eyes and hearts to ward off evil.

From Lutetia, the roads heading north began to fill with legionaries and auxiliaries from all over the empire. They were heading in the same direction, where they expected a fleet to take them to Britannia. The presence of the emperor and his praetorian guard on those roads brought a new energy. They all knew it meant the assault was coming, with chances for gold and slaves and violence – always violence. Agrippina could see that hunger in some of them, a roll of their shoulders that meant trouble for anyone who faced them.

Snarling officers had the men stand back out of respect for Claudius, clearing the narrow lanes for him as he rushed to the front, then coming up at a jingling double speed behind. In that way, Claudius became the tip of the spear heading north, his progress a net on all the silver fish heading to the rally points.

His praetorians were joined by thousands more as they crossed wooden bridges over the river Somme. The air changed then. Agrippina could smell the sea, a freshness of salt where it had all been lush and green in the interior. Gaul was larger than she had ever imagined and she had sympathy for the men who had to march those long roads. Yet the end was in sight. Lucius felt it, even Claudius sat up straight and ceased to shift on his piles.

The road wound towards Gesoriacum. Agrippina saw a great lighthouse on the cliffs there, the massive brazier invisible in the glare of day. Claudius was almost trembling with excitement.

“That is where Caesar embarked, my d-dear – twice. The great p-port, the gateway to Britannia. You see that l-lighthouse? Your brother G-Gaius had it built. We had lost half a d-dozen galleys trying to f-find their way to safe

harbour d-during a storm. The coast is cruel here, but we b-build, we improve. You will see. Caesar f-found Gesoria-cum a place of mud and t-tides – worthless land guarded by Gaulish s-savages. He brought Rome to this p-place. Caligula built them a great l-lamp, giving them light.’

‘And were they grateful?’ Lucius asked.

Claudius reached out and ruffled his hair.

‘Were they grateful? No one ever is. They fought t-tooth and nail against our p-people, Lucius, so no. Yet their grandchildren have this p-port. They have our laws – and vigiles and t-trade . . . If they show even a little wit or p-promise, they can take a road south and actually make something of themselves. I think it was a fair b-bargain, don’t you?’

The boy nodded, agreeing. He had once mocked Claudius’ stammer to his mother and had his face slapped. He touched his cheek in sour memory as he listened.

‘I will do the same in B-Britannia, Lucius,’ Claudius went on obliviously. He was eyeing Agrippina to see if she was listening. ‘I will be a c-conqueror to them.’

Agrippina saw a great bustle of scribes and legion officers making their way along the docks, pushing and shoving to reach the emperor. They had been waiting for him to appear and no doubt needed a thousand decisions from him. She knew Claudius would be called away, perhaps lost to her for days. She had been given the name of a tavern in the village, with a room kept for her. Claudius thought of everything and she knew she had shown little gratitude. She looked for the right words before he was swept up.

‘I think the gods brought us to this coast, together,’ she said. ‘If my brother Gaius built that great light, you will be the one to carry it across. Only you, Claudius.’

He looked as if she had struck him, his mouth working and his eyes wide, as if trying to commit her beauty to memory.

‘Thank you,’ he said weakly. He glanced over at the lighthouse. The day was fading into grey and he could see a light gleam there, a brazier of oil and charcoal that would be seen for miles. ‘I will, Agrippina. This is why they chose me, why I was made emperor, I am certain. To do this.’

The crowd arrived, making his praetorians bristle as they pressed too close. Agrippina took her son’s hand and moved away, heading for the tavern. She heard Claudius bring order to the crowd with waspish commands. She looked back at him, wanting to see him in his natural element. He brought order, it was true.

He was still watching her, she realised. She raised a hand and he copied the action, then fell back to taking questions and putting his seal to documents at great speed. He was Rome on that shore.

Agrippina looked beyond him, to the fleet that had been gathered in his name. She had never seen so many ships in one place. She doubted anyone ever had. Legions were camped on hills as far as her eyes could see, a host of tents and trenches dug. Yet that was no stranger than looking out on the sprawling city from high on the Palatine. The fleet though, was a wonder. To take fifty thousand men across to Britannia, Claudius had diverted the treasuries of nations.

‘Do you see the fleet, Lucius?’ she said.

He pulled his hand out of hers, running to a hillock and shading his eyes against the setting sun.

‘How many are there?’ he said.

She shrugged.

‘Thousands? I don’t know.’ Even as she watched, she could see more coming from the east along the shore, their oars working hard to reach safe harbour before the light failed. ‘All the ships in the world? If he lashed them all together, perhaps he could walk across.’

‘What? Is that possible?’ Lucius asked.

He thought he was being mocked, but Agrippina felt a sort of awe. Claudius was not a great bull of a man . . . he was not a snake like Tiberius either. He didn’t inspire the sort of terror Caligula had brought to Rome, but he had still done all this, gathered *all this* in his name. It was an extraordinary thing and she wondered at it.

The air was very clear. In the last light, she thought she could see a line of white in the distance across that sea, like a haze almost. She shivered, but not in fear. She would go with Claudius when he crossed. She would see this land of tin and coal and oysters – and she would see it standing at his side.

She walked Lucius away from the dunes and into a town that owed its existence to the presence of the fleet and the invasion force. Claudius had said only officers were allowed to enter the place, while the legionaries they commanded remained in camp, training or polishing their kit. He had also said that Agrippina would be as safe there as in the temple of Vesta in Rome, that she had only to call out and half his senior men would come running.

She entered streets with raised wooden walkways, her feet protected from the slop of manure and hog bristles. A strange shriek sounded ahead. For a moment, she thought it was foxes mating, but no, this was different. She held Lucius’ hand again, in case he went running off. Still, she

was not prepared for the sight that met her eyes as she rounded a corner and came across the main square.

Lucius whooped and broke her grip, running forward. Agrippina could only stare at creatures she had never known. She walked in a sort of trance and the optio of a legion century saw and strolled over. He had a proprietorial air and beamed at her reaction.

‘Aren’t they glorious?’ he said. ‘African elephants. Two young bulls and a cow, though between you and me, the cow is the one to watch. She is a vicious one.’ He saw Lucius trying to reach out and his voice hardened. ‘Stop that, boy! Unless you want to lose an arm.’

Lucius reacted as if stung, looking at him in anger.

‘They won’t hurt me,’ he said mulishly.

The man seemed to take it as a challenge, turning away from his perusal of Agrippina.

‘No? These are *war* elephants, boy. This wooden fence is to stop you getting your head crushed. It wouldn’t stop them if they took a notion to break out. See those chains on their legs? They are killers. Oh, they answer to the whip well enough, but they will trample men like wheat when Claudius brings them over. Those blue-painted bastards have never seen anything like my lads, nor my girl Vespia here.’

Agrippina looked up and he smiled sheepishly.

‘She stings, domina. This your boy?’

Lucius was reaching out. One of the elephants raised a long trunk to him, questing for food. He patted the grey thing in wonder. They had eyes like his mother, he thought. Brown and liquid, with lashes. There was an awareness there. He stared and the huge bull flapped its ear at him, tossing its head. Lucius gasped and laughed.

‘Come *away*, Lucius!’ Agrippina snapped.

The legion officer had given his warnings. She had the impression he was just waiting for something to go wrong. Lucius ignored his mother as if he'd gone deaf, so she had to take hold of his tunic and drag him clear. She was still stronger than him, thank goodness, at least that year.

The optio looked disappointed. He hawked and spat on the ground.

'See those tusks and flat foreheads? These boys can smash through anything – brothers from the finest bull you ever saw. They're still growing, if you can believe it. They can push a wall down even now!'

'How . . . can these great beasts fit in a ship?' Agrippina asked. It was another reminder of Claudius' attention to detail. To have brought such creatures from Africa to this place, just to sow terror in the hearts of tribesmen . . . it was a day of wonders.

'We put riders up on them, cross huge great corvus gates to get them on board, then lash them in place on deck. I've even seen them swim, domina. You'd think something so big would sink like a stone, but they swim like dogs.' He glared at Lucius as the boy tried to creep close once more. 'Don't be fooled, though. They are watching your boy. And these three are killers.'

Agrippina saw Lucius eyeing the bars of the fence that prevented the elephants from leaving the square. She knew her son was considering darting in amongst them. She tightened her grip.

'They are wonderful,' she said.

The man looked pleased.

'I'd be happy to, er . . . show you more, domina. If you want to come back without the lad.' He grinned at her, showing a few strong yellow teeth.

She shook her head.

‘I’m sure my uncle Claudius wanted me to rest,’ she said.

He reacted to that name as if he’d seen a ghost, paling and turning back to his charges, patting the vast grey flanks as he went. They seemed quiet enough for him, she thought. Yet they were huge. The thought of them charging into a line of men was impossible to imagine.

‘Come, Lucius,’ she murmured. ‘Let us find this “Blue Boar” tavern and get something to eat.’ She knew her son well and so she twisted his ear, making him yell. ‘And I will put my bed up against the door tonight. You can sleep on the floor, like a Spartan. And if you try and creep out to see those beasts again, I will drown you at the docks. Do you understand?’

He kicked a stone as he walked.

‘Wouldn’t drown . . .’ he muttered. ‘Would hold my breath.’

She ignored him, passing through a bustling crowd, all preparing for war.

Messalina paused at the door, looking left and right along the street. She was not certain, could never be certain, but there was still that sense of being watched, a prickling discomfort. She worked the catch and backed into the house, staring through the hole in the door.

When she turned, she made a stifled sound of sudden shock, looking from face to face. They were already inside. She would have fled then, if one of them hadn’t put an arm across the door.

Vinicius was there, sitting on a chair she knew he had made himself. He had been battered, she saw, her heart breaking as she met his eyes. A burly man stood behind

him in a brown tunic and cloak, holding a knife across Vinicius' throat. Two more leaned against the walls, all grinning at her shock – the house was not large enough for so many.

Someone had lit the lamps, she noted. Vinicius was a master of his trade, his walls covered in images of coasts, all copied from memory. She had spent hours just watching him reproduce them. He made maps for the emperor, his extraordinary skill guarded with jealousy. Yet in his own time, he had copied the best ones again. As she stood there she could see the shores of Jerusalem and Athens, drawn in coloured inks and framed. He was as much an artist as a craftsman and he made things of beauty.

With the one who stood behind the door, the four men filled that place. She could smell their bitter sweat.

Messalina felt her stomach drop away as she realised how much trouble she was in. She kept looking at Vinicius, trying to apologise without words, lost in his stricken gaze.

'Don't scream,' the man with the knife said. His voice was gentle, almost reproachful. He was watching her closely and she could see the blade was pressed deeply into the skin of Vinicius' throat. The man she loved dared not move, not with that thing ready to slice away his life.

'Let me go – let us both go,' she said. 'I have wealth, gold, jewels. More than you have ever seen. Please. Just put the knife away and say I was never here. Let us run. Your children will be richer than senators.'

'I'm sure the little bastards will fend for themselves,' the man said. 'If they ever learn my name.' He was smiling, but there was a terrible tension in him. 'Come further in, love. I should tell you what's going to happen.'

As long as he was talking, there was hope. Messalina

looked around for anything she could use, any hint of a plan. Vinicius was helpless and the door was closed at her back. She could neither run nor fight her way free. She played the only card she had.

‘My husband is emperor,’ she said. ‘I am mother to a little girl named Octavia and a son: Tiberius Claudius Caesar. If you hurt me, my husband will destroy you. I understand you must have orders. I understand the stakes. I can pay to have you set those orders aside. Set me free and I will make sure you never want for anything, any of you.’

The man exchanged glances with the others, reading their reaction. It was clear who led the little group. His sleeve had edged back from his knife hand as he looked around. The tattoo of a scorpion made her breath catch in her throat.

Praetorians inked themselves with a few different symbols – the emperor’s wreath, a legion eagle. The most common image cut into their skin and stained in oak gall was the creature that terrified all men.

‘Your husband was the one who sent us,’ the man with the knife said. ‘He trusts me to arrange a little scene for him. Rome is a dangerous city, my dear. A woman who slips her guard to go to the theatre can always be found murdered, no matter who she is.’

The man he held still tried to struggle then. He gasped as blood appeared, dripping down his neck.

‘Quiet there, son,’ his captor said. He hadn’t moved.

Messalina could only blink at him, her world in ruins.

‘Even if Claudius . . . gave the order, he will turn on the ones who carried it out. You know that is true. Take my offer instead. Take the gold I can give you and vanish.’ She

gestured to the maps on the walls. ‘Anywhere in the world, to live as princes. Please . . .’ she whispered. She was reaching them. She felt the change in the air. She started shaking, almost violently.

‘I’m sorry,’ the man said. ‘Just don’t start shrieking, all right? I can’t bear the sound. If you need to pray or pass on a message, I’ll hear it. But you are done, understand? I have orders and that’s the end of it. So, keep quiet. It’ll go easier.’

With a sudden jerk, he drew the knife across her lover’s throat, cutting deeply. The man pressed a hand against Vinicius’ forehead, keeping him upright as the blood poured. He used his knife hand to fend off the fingers rising to the throat. Messalina watched Vinicius’ pupils grow huge, as if darkness seeped into them. It was as quick as butchery. The praetorian slapped his cheeks to be sure, then leaned over. He took a moment to drive the dagger up into the heart, already stuttering. He left the blade in place, handle sticking out. She watched as it twitched, and twitched, then grew still.

‘There. Unpleasant, but the sort of wounds a man might get in a street robbery.’

The praetorian wiped his hands on a cloth. He grimaced, but he was as relaxed as a slaughterman, looking over his stock in trade.

‘I’m afraid your husband wanted you to see that,’ he said. ‘It’s a shame, I think. We have one of Vinicius’ maps on the wall in our barracks. He had a fine hand, but there it is. Now, love.’ He saw tears spring in her eyes and scowled. ‘Don’t start squalling! Can’t bear high sounds. I can make it easy or hard for you, so don’t make any of that noise, all right?’

‘How did he find out?’ Messalina said, her voice trembling.

The man nodded, pleased she was at least trying not to scream.

‘We’ve been watching you for an age, domina. Every time you went into the city, we were there, ready to act. I thought tonight would be it, though some of the lads didn’t. I’ve won a bit of silver on you, but it’ll only make up my losses from before.’

‘I was careful . . .’ she whispered.

He laughed at that.

‘There are slaves and servants all over the city, love. Curled up in every doorway and every room. Your husband just had to ask a few questions in the right places. You thought walking through a theatre was being careful, did you? Dear me. Those actors notice everything – and everyone who comes to see them. They have a nose for money you wouldn’t believe. And for intrigue, come to think of it. You’d have been better off walking through the senate. I’m only sorry you went to Naevis Macro. That was the last straw for your husband.’

She lunged forward, grabbing the knife he had left with the handle facing her. The man raised his eyes and tutted.

‘I had that placed perfect. What are you going to do with it though? You can’t fight your way out, love.’

Messalina felt her hands shaking. She knew what she had to do and moved before they could throw arms around her or grapple her to the ground. She whipped the knife across her neck with huge force, feeling blood spray. The pain was quick and made her gasp as she fell to her knees.

‘Looks about right,’ the praetorian said grudgingly. ‘Imperial mapmaker attacks her when she refuses his

advances . . . she fights, stabs him, gashes his throat as she dies. Not perfect, if I'm honest, but it will have to do. Terrible tragedy, emperor inconsolable. Yes. That'll do, lads.'

Messalina collapsed, the knife clattering from her hand. Darkness swirled, breaking his words into pieces of glass.

Her last thought was of her son and daughter, left alone. No, she realised. Not alone. Agrippina would be there.

25

Claudius watched another sixty triremes launch, oars flickering with white spray as they joined the main fleet. He was exhausted, but also exhilarated. The stone he had started was rolling and he did not think it could be stopped, not then. Perhaps it had begun with new lands annexed a thousand miles east of Rome. He'd needed those for the iron ore in their hills. Crude ingots had been taken overland to Hispania, where master smiths hammered them in beds of charcoal. Now his legions had new swords and spears, weapons taken from the earth itself.

Or perhaps it had been the British king who had travelled to Rome and asked for his aid against the sons of Cunobelin. Even Julius Caesar had preferred to have a reason for an invasion. The divine Julius had answered cries for help in Gaul – and brought them peace and slavery. Claudius would do the same. He touched his lips in honour of Venus, then his sword hilt. Mars was the patron of war and iron. The dark god would be present on that shore, on the ships full of men.

Claudius had summoned the four legion legates to his presence the night before, giving them his final instructions. He saw no contempt in those men. If one or two of them had known him in the hard years, when Caligula terrified all Rome, they gave no sign of it.

Away from the shore, part of the fleet eased clear of the rest, taking a different route. The waves were iron-grey and the wind blew, but the sky remained clear. Claudius had waited a week on omens of good fortune, as the priests of Jupiter said he must. Yet neither were those men fools. They had made him wait out a storm, then found the approval of the gods the very moment the sun shone.

Standing on the hills behind Gesoriacum, Claudius watched his ideas take shape. A century before, Julius had landed all his forces in one place, trusting to luck the land there wasn't some mire to trap horses and men.

Claudius had planned. His scouts had mingled with Gaulish traders, making the crossing to Britannia months before. Knowledge was his strength. Others could inspire the men with glorious speeches of home and hearth. Claudius would pay them on time. He would map the route they would take and make sure they had food and tools. He clenched his fist as he watched them row. He would bring order, and order would bring victory.

Three legions would land on the coast of the Cantii tribe, while a fourth drove up fast and hard from further south, with auxiliaries. If painted Britons gathered to repel the larger force, they would be hit from behind, at their most vulnerable moment.

He frowned, feeling a sense of loss as his fleet began to dwindle in the haze. He imagined it was how a woman felt when her child went out into the world, no longer part of

her. That turned his thoughts to Messalina and the orders he had given.

It had been one thing to humiliate him when he was just the uncle of Caligula, beaten and mocked in front of the court. He'd wept to her in the nights then and she'd comforted him, but he'd always known she found other arms. He had ignored that sting in his greater need, just grateful for whatever part of her she granted him.

It was different now. He would have the world know his name. Those who had mocked him would all learn that he was patient – and that he forgot absolutely nothing. An emperor could not have a wife stealing away to a lover.

A wave of sadness crept across him. He knew he was right. Not only did Messalina humiliate the office he held – and through that office, the gods – she also cast doubt on the bloodline of their son. That was almost harder to forgive than all the rest, he thought. Unless he acted quickly, there would be whispers following little Tiberius all his life.

He could not forgive her. Yet it was not for his wounded pride that he had given orders, he reminded himself. That was the concern of lesser men. No, he moved for the dignity of Rome and their son.

Six galleys remained on the beaches of Gesoriacum. Two of them bore his war elephants, to be delivered to the shores of the Cantii when the sea was clear of chop. Another two would head to an island on the south coast, to sack villages there. The last pair were his flagship and its sister, the largest and most stable in the fleet. His praetorians waited for his presence to embark. Agrippina and her little bullock of a son would join him on that deck, though . . . He forced himself to focus on the campaign. There was no time to think of his aches and longings, the

way she was like an unguent to him. With his finger, he could smear her on old pains and they would vanish. He felt his skin roughen at the thought, unless it was the wind.

No, the invasion came first. Once he had set a thousand villages and towns on fire, once his men had smashed the tribes and rounded up the women and children to be shipped back to Rome, he would have time to think of Agrippina.

He walked down to the ships, gulls screaming overhead. The sun was warm on his skin, the sea almost gentle. Even rowing against the tide, the coast of Britannia was just half a day away. He had planned every detail, driving himself to utter exhaustion. He was ready.

His personal guard fell in around him as he reached the harbour. The remaining galleys would use great ropes and the oars to drag their mates off the shingle and into deep water. His flagship and her sister were at a stone dock, attached to the land with a gangplank and hawsers as thick as his arm.

He saw Agrippina there, waiting for him. She wore a dress of the palest blue, almost white in the morning sun. His heart leaped to see it and he knew it was a good omen. He ignored her son as the little boy scratched himself, scowling.

The other ships slid into the water and he heard elephants trumpet, either in fear or some savage excitement, he didn't know. Claudius looked across and saw their tusks had been tipped in gold, just as he'd asked. It was the sort of detail that pleased him.

'Did you s-see the elephants, Agrippina?' he asked, shading his eyes. 'Are they n-not extraordinary?'

'I have never seen anything like them,' she said with honesty.

He nodded, suffused with pride.

‘Some men think wars are won with shield lines and swords, with spears and onagers to smash down the enemy walls.’ He waved a hand. ‘They are not wrong, of course. Those things matter. Courage and tradition matter. Yet what matters more is that those men are fed, that they have the swords and shields and helmets they need. That their horses arrive with saddles and reins, that their pay is brought on time every month. Without those things, all their courage counts for nothing. You will see, when we land on the beaches of a new land. The edge of the world, Agrippina! Men painted in blue woad, who speak no Latin. Bears and wolves and savage tribes.’

Her eyes were wide and it seemed natural enough for her to lean against him. He felt her trembling and did not consider it was because she had to bend her back to nestle her head beneath his own. He patted her hair.

‘I will protect you, Agrippina, I swear it. Come, let us board.’

Lucius would have run on before the emperor then, without a thought for Claudius’ dignity. Agrippina just managed to snag the boy’s tunic neck, holding him back though he made choking sounds. Claudius bowed his head in thanks. His men were watching, arrayed on the deck in perfect ranks, waiting to be sent to war.

The scout ran through the woods. Wicc’s bare feet hardly touched the ground as he pelted along, or if they did, he didn’t feel the hurt of stones and thorns through the thick callus. Smoke spilled through the trees behind him, rising from the highest point on the chalk. For years, the people

of the town had called him their hermit, sitting up there without a wife or children, tending a vast pile of oil-soaked wood. Well, he had proved his worth that day. He had lit it – and it was crackling away unstoppably behind him, despite all the green boughs he'd laid on. He hadn't dared leave until its heart was aflame and there was no putting it out, even if it started to rain.

His breath was cold in his throat as he ran, but he knew there would be other bonfires springing to life all along the coast, on all the hills. Wicc's had been the first, he was certain. He might have been pleased about that, if not for the fleet rowing towards the shore, far below the white cliffs. He was a man of the chalk – he had collected the strange stone creatures he found in it all his life. The cliffs were his home, the sea his wife. He had never needed much more in the way of company, just a day or two around the darkest nights of the year, when one of his aunts kept watch for him and he was able to get drunk and tell stories with those he had known as a boy. They were all getting a bit grey now, he thought ruefully, but he was still fast. All the years of damp and cold, of peering across the sea in all weathers and seasons, had finally come to something. It still felt like a dream, as if he would wake yet to peace and soft summer rain.

He skidded at the bottom of the hill, turning onto the track the lads used when they went to their boats to fish. The village was further in, across fields sown with barley. He could taste the beer they made as he ran, the odd, honey-sweet bitterness of it. That was why his village had paid for a palisade of wood and even stone walls for the brewhouse. The old man lived there and Wicc thought he was drunk most of the time.

Turnoc was a decent enough sort. Wicc knew he wouldn't be killed for bringing him the terrible news, or at least he hoped not. Turnoc's cousins were a different matter, however. Wicc would not want to be the one who carried talk of Roman legions to the king of the Catuvellauni, or his maniac brother.

The village was humming like a wild hive when he skidded to a halt. Wicc saw the dogs all howling and snapping in their enclosure. Turnoc bred mastiffs, and for every litter he sold, he kept at least one, so that he had built a pack of around twenty of the beasts. They sensed something, Wicc realised, or perhaps they smelled war on the air. He stayed clear as he passed them, all snarling rage, climbing one another in their excitement.

Every man there seemed to be rushing about with iron in his hands. Wicc glanced back the way he had come and finally understood. The plume of smoke he had begun was there, curling in the distance. Of course they had seen it. That was the point.

'Wicc! What news?' Turnoc shouted as soon as he recognised the scout.

Wicc felt himself grow red-faced, his breath like fire.

'Rome. Many ships, rowing.'

The old man looked grim at that. With his mouth twisting in his beard, he dropped a powerful hand to Wicc's shoulder.

'We didn't send a man to watch who couldn't count, did we, Wicc? How many is "many ships"?''

Wicc nodded, swallowing the thick spit that gummed his mouth. He had run for miles as if driven by spirits of the dead. He still feared his heart might burst through his ribs.

‘I saw . . . hundreds. Six or eight hundred, maybe more. I didn’t stop to count every last one, did I? I thought you’d want to know . . . they were coming.’

Turnoc made a soft growling sound. He thumped Wicc on the shoulder and began to roar to the pair of brawny brothers who served his magnificence, who kept order for him when the villagers drank too much beer or felt his laws too harshly on their backs. Wicc scowled at them. Jac and Tam had beaten him up once, just for laughing when one of them fell over.

‘You two!’ Turnoc shouted. ‘Send word to Cunobelin’s sons. Tell them Rome has returned to the coast.’ He glanced at Wicc and shook his head. ‘Six or eight hundred ships. Maybe more.’

Village boys brought ponies from Turnoc’s stable. The brothers leaped onto their backs and kicked them into a run, whooping as they went.

Turnoc saw Wicc still watching, waiting for further orders.

‘What? The Cantii can’t stop legions, not on our own. I can’t put more than two hundred men in the field – and I wouldn’t trust half those vicious bastards to know one end of an axe from another – or to stay sober. No, we need the Catuvellauni. Those lads rule the south, as they are always telling us. They’re the ones who sit at the head of the council, when they call it. They are the ones who expelled that fool Verica, accusing him of being a Roman spy. We need Togodumnus, because even brave men need a king to stand with them – but more importantly, we need his brother. Togodumnus may sit the throne this seven-year, but if you need to break heads and turn the sea red, you need Caractacus. He’s the son Cunobelin wanted, the war leader.’

Turnoc’s expression turned inward then, looking back

to years long gone. Wicc saw he was rubbing one hand with another, where two fingers were missing. The old man saw he had noticed and shrugged.

‘Long time ago,’ he grunted. He was fifty years old and there was white in his beard.

‘Shall I . . . go back to my post on the cliffs, Turnoc?’ Wicc asked.

‘No point now, is there? That’s all done, at least for this year.’ He sighed at the younger man’s stricken expression. ‘I’ve had a good life, Wicc. I’ve lost three boys, but two have grown to manhood and married – and I have one daughter who is the light of my winter years, I don’t mind telling you. I’d like her to find a husband, not end up in some Roman slave market. And this is a good land. It’s ours, Wicc. Understand? This is a sacred place and we won’t give it up to those shining whoresons, with their marching ranks and coloured shields. You have to fight to keep a place like this. So find yourself a long-handled hammer from the smith, or a hunting bow, or an axe, before they’re all gone. Something you can kill with.’

He saw the younger man was wide-eyed and he sighed, rubbing the stumps of his lost fingers once again. They always hurt when there was trouble coming.

‘Look, it’s not hopeless. The tribes will gather when the Catuvellauni call. You’ll see. There’s no peace without the will to hold our shores. They’ve come to take everything we have, to spit in the faces of our gods. Understand? There’s no running from this. Fight or die – and probably do both.’

Claudius watched as bonfires sprang up all along the coast, spreading as points of light into the gloom. He could see

smoke rising from each one, rousing warriors to defend their land from an invader. It was thrilling to be the one they feared, the lion prowling around the sheep.

The emperor showed his teeth as he stood there, one hand firmly around the prow as it plunged and rose, dripping white spray. He was already soaked, of course, but he had to see. When he raised his hand, the orders were roared out and his rowers backed oars, holding the flagship in that spot. There was power, he thought, exulting in it.

One of his galleys had turned over in the surf, not a hundred paces from where he stood at the prow. Two more were stuck on sandbanks no one had known were there. They had lost their masts in the impact, but they could be towed off. Claudius winced at broken oars and drowned men in the surf. He could calculate costs spent and wasted down to the last coin. There were fortunes tumbling on that shore.

He reminded himself to expect losses. No campaign was without flaw. Men broke legs, or caught fevers or chills from wading through a cold sea. They gashed themselves on their own kit, dying of some fever of the blood before they ever saw battle. Or they disobeyed orders and had to be hanged. He had allowed for such things – until he dreamed each night of lists and nails and pouring silver coins.

Ahead of the beached galleys, three full legions gathered on the beach in good order. That was a sight to swell the heart. Fifteen thousand legionaries raised banners there, roaring orders to at least as many auxiliaries and camp followers. Thirty thousand men was a strap laid across the land, a mark of intent. Even as Claudius watched, brass cornu horns began to blare and drums to

sound, stiffening the sinews of all who heard. They had come. That was the message. Rome had come. The cliffs had given way to the mouth of a great river and they would march from that place, challenging all the tribes of the land to come and meet them.

Still Claudius watched, his rowers beating against the current. The galleys already on the shingle leaned, making it easier to unload his spars and horsehair springs. Claudius had brought thirty siege weapons to that place, to break the walls of Briton kings. He saw teams of oxen being tacked up to drag them inland. Mules too were there, as well as the horses of his officers. He had dropped Rome like a weight on that shore and every moment that passed brought order out of chaos. He wanted to shout out, to howl in the setting sun.

‘Agrippina, c-can you see?’ he called to her.

Her son Lucius came to the front, clinging like a little ape to the other side of the prow. For once, Claudius did not resent his presence or have any desire to kick him. He saw Agrippina had come closer and he breathed, feeling his blood warm just at her presence.

‘We’ll land, Agrippina. Can you see? When I set f-foot on that shore, Rome will be in Britannia once m-more, after almost a hundred years.’

‘Where are the painted men?’ Lucius asked.

Claudius ignored him, though he shaded his eyes and peered along that piece of coast. He had seen them on the white cliffs further to the west, keeping pace with his galleys. There was no sign of them on those beaches, not then. He set his jaw. Caesar had said they had come right down to the sea’s edge, that they had fought in the surf as he’d tried to land, with massive war dogs. Perhaps they had

learned a little caution in the years since! He smiled to himself at that thought. The stories of Rome would have grown in the telling. That was always the way of it. No doubt they told their children to go to sleep, or Romans would come like wolves in the night. He could imagine the fear spreading with the news. Caesar's men had returned, as Julius himself had promised.

The waves were growing rough as the sun eased to the horizon, lighting the shore in dark gold. Claudius almost lost his grip on the prow in one sickening drop, though Lucius cried out in delight.

'Captain!' Claudius called. He looked to see if Agrippina was watching. Yes, she was standing there, looking a little grey. He didn't feel the great sickness that had assailed him before. No . . . he felt his stomach lurch and acid come into his mouth.

The captain had come running, saluting on the heaving deck.

'Wait,' Claudius called back to him. Two more galleys had caught up while he held position. His war elephants were on those decks, trussed in thick chains across their backs and around each leg. Yet he knew how strong they were.

'See those elephants, boy?' he said to Lucius. He and the child watched in awe as the triremes struggled against unseen currents. There was room for them on shore, between galleys that had already made the landing. Claudius saw the closest captain pick his spot and order attack speed.

The emperor tightened his arm on the prow as the galley crashed onto the beach. The pair of bull elephants screamed. One of the chains leaped like a snake as it

snapped, making Claudius suck in a cold breath. No, the others held. He watched the vessel come to rest, followed in by its sister ship. All three elephants had survived the crossing. He could see the beasts flailing and flapping their ears, mad with fear.

‘Take me in, captain,’ Claudius called in satisfaction. ‘In this, I am Jupiter. I will set foot on this land before the day ends.’

The captain roared new orders, passed to the rowers. They ceased the slow, holding stroke and held out the great bladed lengths, panting at the respite. The galley swooped and rolled, exposed to the movement of the waves. Claudius felt his stomach rebel and belched into his fist as the oars plunged once again, making his flagship hiss through dark waters.

His legions held the shore. He watched as the keel touched, cutting shingle with a roar. He had landed.

26

‘We have to hit them – with everything, before they dig in, before they build their camps, before they sink pits and fill baskets with stone for their walls. You remember the old fort at home? It still stands, a couple of generations later! A place they made in a single day, so Dad said! These bastards build, Tog. They dig.’

Caractacus was the younger brother, product of a wild second wife. It showed, sometimes, when his blood was up. As a warrior, he had few equals in the Catuvellauni. His skill with sword and shield was respected wherever men broke bread, from shore to shore. Yet he could be too quick to attack, Togodumnus knew that.

As older brother, Togodumnus had been the voice of caution for most of their lives. That suited his nature, as he preferred to hold back, to think and plan before they blew horns and went to war. The combination had served them both well. With Caractacus leading war parties and Togodumnus planning where best to send them, the Catuvellauni had taken lands from the river Medway in the east,

right to the western sea – and all the white cliffs along the south. Togodumnus was king of a greater nation than their father had known, his line secured in wives and a dozen children. Yet he watched his brother pace back and forth in the fortress hall, while a fire roared in the hearth. The building was of dressed stone, with curtain walls and long huts spreading away like the legs of a spider. Togodumnus was king, but he still waited for Caractacus to cool his rage.

‘We’ve called them,’ Caractacus said. ‘All those leaders and chiefs who swore oath to you – all those tribes who bent the knee in submission. They are all marching, brother, with axes ready and blood in their eyes. More than the Romans know we have! Better iron, better bows, chariots on the meadows, warhorses. We have not been idle for these hundred summers! We have mined iron enough to cut all their throats. But if we give them time, brother . . . if we let the whores settle and build their walls, we’ll never dig them out. Set me loose. Let me draw iron and kill for you.’

Caractacus waited for a reply and Togodumnus saw his anger had eased. His first reaction was always to threaten violence, but that passed in a while, letting his more cunning self to the surface. Not that he would ever admit it, of course. He had no faith in his own wits. Yet this time Togodumnus thought they needed the warrior more than the thinker.

‘No one stays behind for this one,’ Togodumnus said. ‘Not me, not any of the lads. If Turnoc is right about the number of ships, we’ll need every man and boy.’

He did not speak of death then, though he felt its shadow steal into the hall. Memories of Caesar were not

ancient things in that place. Their grandfather had stood against men of Rome in his youth – and seen all his kinsmen cut down. He'd left stories of the invaders and descriptions of their tactics, of the way they stood and marched, the orders they called. He'd done his best to prepare his son Cunobelin – and in turn, he had raised Togodumnus and Caractacus with the knowledge that they might come again.

A host of summers had passed – and Togodumnus had begun to think he would not see them return. To hear of red-cloaked men and galleys crashing on their shore was like childish nightmares coming true, as if he saw shadows move or heard voices whisper in the deep forest. The news froze him, made it hard even to think.

'I don't care about their forts, Carac,' he said at last. 'They can sit inside those and starve, for all I care. No, they have come to take the land. They can't do that from behind walls and pits.'

He stood up from his throne, a thing of polished wood that gleamed gold in the firelight.

'I'll take archers out to them, brother.' Togodumnus braced for the objection he knew would come.

'That's not your way!' Caractacus snorted. 'Come on now . . .'

'Wait to hear it all. Just a few hundred hunters with good bows. I'll sting their Roman hides – and learn the strengths and weaknesses in them. At worst, I'll slow them down as they come inland. I'll win you a little more time.'

He saw his brother's refusal building and spoke on, his voice stern.

'You'll gather the tribes in the name of the Catuvellauni, of our father Cunobelin. Place them on the banks of the

river Medway. When my hunters have shot the last, I'll come back to you – and I'll bring them howling after me, to drown or be killed at your hand. I know the crossing places. I can get back in the dark. How does that appeal to my wild brother?'

After a long pause, Caractacus nodded, grudgingly.

'It will do. You sting them – and bring them after you. I crush them, like wasps under my thumb. It works, brother.'

They embraced then. Neither brother wore battle colours. They would apply woad, staining their skins a blue that made them invisible in the night. It would hide the doubt in them as well, the sense that even the grand old men had not been able to stop a Caesar coming inland. They were just the grandsons and they did not know if they could do it.

Togodumnus came out of his hall to a vast crowd, still growing. There were young women there with children on their hips, waiting to hear what he would do. They would suffer worst if their men failed to hold the enemy at bay. He set his mouth at that, seeing two of his own wives among them. A couple of his boys were there as well, watching the one they trusted their lives to.

'Women and girls should head away from the coast – west and north,' Togodumnus said to them. 'Tell anyone you meet that you travel under my seal, that if you are hurt, the Catuvellauni will answer for your honour, that we'll come down on them like a hammer. Heed the words of my brother when I am gone. Pray to the Green Man and the Morrigan to guide our blades and arrows. This is our home. We will stand in her defence.'

He nodded to them. They understood the stakes. The enemy had come and he could see fear in them, but also determination. He hoped it would be enough.

Warriors were still coming in, trotting in single file like wolf packs as they answered the call of the Catuvellauni. In normal years, they would rather have fought one another before agreeing to appear around the hearths of enemies. Yet they were not fools. The Romans didn't understand differences between Iceni and Trinovantes, Cantii or Catuvellauni. They had come to kill or enslave them all – and so those warriors offered fealty to Togodumnus and Caractatus. The brothers were the bonfire on the hill, the flame that called.

Togodumnus looked around until he saw Alcar, his master of the hunt. The bearded man was waiting with a dozen good lads, all with bows unstrung. He whistled to him.

'I need good archers, Alcar, if you're willing. We are to sting them, shed a little blood and warm them up for my brother. To make them angry, so they will rush after us.'

The hunters all grinned to hear that. It was the sort of trick they all knew. Alcar nodded, holding up his bow to the crowd.

'Which of you can hit a bird in flight?' he called.

Hands went up and he began to call them to him. Togodumnus flexed his shoulders. He would carry his father's iron sword rather than a bow. A dozen miles lay before him, loping through wood trails with younger men, with the prospect of a fight and a wild run back. He groaned to himself at the thought. His knees would swell, he knew. At least it was summer. The rain was usually warmer in summer.

Claudius could not hide his smile as Agrippina and her son entered the tent. Servants stood against the wall and a feast was laid out on a wooden table, with couches alongside. Poles held up a double peak to give the tent height and

air – carved and painted black and gold, as if they were pillars of ebony. That great room was lit with lamps that swung on chains, or braziers, sitting on squares of black marble.

His men had worked like slaves to create the first night camps around them, cutting trees and sharpening huge palisades. Thousands of legionaries had raised ramps of earth and stone, with gates they could draw closed against the night. The camps had been created from nothing in just a few hours, the labour completed as the sun set. Outside that tent, thousands more stretched away in all directions, while on the ramparts, legionaries patrolled, calling watchwords to one another.

It was the essence of order and Claudius was delighted by it. Let the savages come! He had seen their bonfires. He could only imagine the fear his invasion had brought. They would be painting themselves and dedicating themselves to savage gods, making curses and terrible oaths. All while he enjoyed the fruits of civilisation – good red wine and a decent haunch of roasted lamb, in a camp laid out to a design that had stood for over a century.

Agrippina chuckled as she looked around.

‘This is a wonder, uncle,’ she said.

He frowned slightly at that.

‘Call me Claudius, p-please, Agrippina.’

He had to prepare the way, to have her accept him as more than just a relative of her father’s generation. He smoothed back his thinning hair with one hand. He was also a man. The campaign was showing her what he could do, better than he could ever explain in words. He saw the delight in her and responded to it, accepting a cup of wine.

‘Just one for me, my d-dear,’ he said. ‘I need to b-be sharp – sharper now than when we were in G-Gaul, I

think.’ He saw Legate Plautius was listening and included the man with a gesture. ‘Not that Aulus here n-needs my instruction. He is the soundest of m-men, Agrippina. As you can see in this c-camp around you. You are as safe here as on the P-Palatine. Is she not, Aulus?’

‘I believe so, Majesty,’ the legate said, bowing.

He too had a cup of wine, though he only sipped it. The emperor’s niece was a beauty, without a doubt. He did not think she was worth laying out a feast room in hostile territory, however. Still, he smiled as Claudius talked of what would lie ahead, trying not to think of all the jobs and checks that awaited him before he could find an hour or two of sleep.

Plautius could have blessed Agrippina when she stifled a yawn. The emperor noticed – he noticed everything she did.

‘My dear, you are exhausted, of c-course. It has b-been a long d-day. To think, we started this m-morning in Gaul! Now we stand here, s-secure in a legion camp that d-did not even exist before. Is it not astonishing what so many thousands of men can do?’

‘It is,’ she said. ‘I am sorry to yawn, Claudius. Lucius too is tired, I’m afraid. He can hardly stand.’

‘I will have a m-man show you to your tent. The rows are all m-marked, you know. Once you learn the s-system of n-numbers, you will never be lost again in a camp of Rome. It is always the same, in p-perfect order.’

‘Thank you, Claudius,’ she said, touching him on the upper arm.

He beamed and bowed his head as she took her son away to sleep.

Once she had gone, Claudius set down the cup of wine he had barely tasted.

‘Where are the B-Britons, Aulus?’ he demanded. ‘Caesar had to f-fight them on the shore, with their d-dogs. Why do they hide from m-me?’

‘There were dozens of tribes then, Majesty. The Catuvelauni count this coast as their fiefdom now. I doubt we will see them before we march inland. If Vespasian ever gets here, we’ll catch them between us and squeeze them like a boil.’

Claudius made a disgusted expression.

‘I see. Very well. I will be watching tomorrow, Aulus. March, engage, set aflame. Conquer, in my name. Let them know we are here.’

The legate let his gaze drift to the entrance, where Agrippina and her son had gone out into the night. He wondered how much of Claudius’ fervour was to impress that woman. He remembered how Caligula had kicked his little uncle across a floor, laughing as he made the smaller man slide on polished stone. It was a secret fear for Aulus Plautius, that Claudius would one day remember he had been present.

‘If I may be dismissed, Majesty, I should meet the other legates and discuss plans for tomorrow and the weeks to come.’

Claudius looked oddly disappointed, but he nodded. The legate left him alone with his servants, the great feast hardly touched, the lights burning low. After a time, Claudius waved a hand for it all to be cleared away and headed to his sleeping tent. He saluted the praetorians on guard there and collapsed onto the camp bed.

The stars were sharp, though clouds drifted across the night. Togodumnus almost wished his brother could be there to see his predictions come to pass. Roman camps

had indeed appeared from the earth, rising like mountains against the black sea. It had been astonishing to watch them completed, thousands of men working together like little ants. In the darkness, the king of the Catuvellauni felt his testicles creep up in memory. It made him feel helpless, at least for a time. He remembered from his father that the Romans would make great camps and then march out from them, covering a set distance each day. If they came under attack before they reached the halfway point, they could always choose to retreat to the previous night's camp. If they won through, they would build another and another, leaving them across the land like pearls on a chain.

He had seen no obvious weakness in those ramps and gates before the light failed. The forts had been made to deter raiding enemies, after all. The lintels and wooden walkways had come from the holds of ships that still lay along the shore. The rest they had cut from oaks and birch further inland.

He'd thought of ambushing those smaller groups but had come too late, seeing them heading back. By the time he'd settled his men, it was almost dark and the chance was missed. He cursed to himself. They needed to strike a blow, to give heart to the tribes that looked to the Catuvellauni.

'The ships,' he whispered to himself. They would make a fine blaze.

He passed orders back to his men and they grinned in the dark. Alcar took his time with flint and iron, blowing on a little nest of tinder until he had a flame. He lit a shuttered lamp then, closing tin sheets around it to keep the wind from snuffing it out. Some of the others wrapped strips of old cloth around trimmed branches, ready to be

lit. When they were ready, they came out from cover, taking a wide path around the camp. Alcar sheltered his lamp like a favourite child. The last thing they wanted was to be spotted by some sharp-eyed sentry.

Togodumnus could see white waves breaking, not half a mile away. The moon glittered there and the sea was gentle, washing the shore rather than crashing against it. Dark shapes blocked the horizon, like great bones stretching into the distance. More of them would be at anchor, but this was not a coast the Romans knew. They would not want to risk their anchors dragging, not when they could sleep on land. Togodumnus remembered a story his father had told, of Caesar losing his first great fleet to a summer storm. It was odd to think of it from the point of view of an enemy. The Romans would tell the same tale.

He scowled as he reached the dunes, dropping to one knee and crumbling wet sand between his fingers. This was the sort of raiding party his brother enjoyed, bringing cattle or women home before dawn. That made him smile, just a little. For once, Togodumnus would have a story to tell his brother, instead of the other way around.

Some two hundred archers trotted along with the king of the Catuvellauni, heading into the shadow of a galley's hull. They could hear snoring overhead. Togodumnus imagined the rowers would prefer to sleep in the warm, rather than on damp sand. That pleased him. The thought of burning them where they lay, of hearing their screams, would bring satisfaction. He had not asked them to come to that shore.

He brought Alcar to his side, leaning in close. Togodumnus hadn't realised the sheer size of the galley when he'd thought of setting it on fire. The curve of the hull

loomed above them, impossibly huge in the night. He could see it would take more than just a few oily torches thrown on deck, if they could even reach so high.

He and his men froze as footsteps sounded overhead, some lone sentry walking his path. They were not all asleep.

‘We’ll need to get on deck,’ he whispered to Alcar. ‘Find me a way up . . .’

If they could get one ship properly alight, the others would wake, of course. Could they manage a second before the alarm was given? He cursed himself. This was what happened when he rushed into action. If Caractacus had been there, he would have come up with some new idea . . .

Shadows moved around the hull, like a spill of darkness. He saw something glitter in the moonlight and swallowed, his stomach dropping in shock. There was movement there.

Everyone with him jumped as a horn suddenly blared, splitting the stillness. Voices were shouting on all sides and there were men coming at him in the dark, swords drawn, hacking their way through.

Togodumnus drew his father’s sword. The legionaries could not see it coming in the dark and he swept it through them as they came into range. The weapon was almost as tall as he was and the weight of iron sent shields flying and broke bones. He felt the crunch as it struck and struck again, hissing even as he despaired. They had been waiting for him.

‘Kill them all!’ he shouted, though it was with a sense of hopelessness.

He heard the thrum of bows as Alcar’s men fought.

There were gasps and grunts of pain in a language he did not know. Shadows moved on all sides. Of *course* they had left their ships under guard! Had they watched him the whole way out to the shore? Waited in the shadow of the hulls for him to reach that point?

He faced two men in legion armour, two of Rome who stood with shields high and those terrible short swords ready to hack and jab. Togodumnus swung with huge strength. They let the blade of Cunobelin crash off their shields, jarring both men to their toes. Before he could recover, they were on him, striking high and low: neck and groin. The king had no time to call out. They swept his life away in an instant.

The archers were cut to pieces. They took a greater toll than even they knew, so that sixty legionaries lay wounded or dying by the time the last one fell. Without armour, they could not stand against legion lines, men who had known and trained with one another for years. It was a grim business, but the senior centurion was pleased enough when the fighting was done. He was about to send a man to report to Aulus Plautius and then decided to go himself. Good news was always worth taking, he recalled. An ambitious centurion from a noble family might even be granted an audience with the emperor.

For a moment, the centurion stood over the fallen men. A lamp lay on its side in the sand nearby, fluttering as its flame failed. He picked it up, wincing at the heat in the metal. He opened the sides and peered at dead savages. More of his men came to see those they had fought in the dark.

The Britons had painted themselves that strange blue that made their eyes look yellow in the light. Perhaps it had

some significance to them, the centurion didn't know. They believed in magic and old gods, he'd heard. None of it had stopped good iron, though. That was what mattered.

One of his men found the huge sword their leader had been swinging. The centurion whistled, calling it over. Officer's perks, of course. He took it and touched his tongue to the blade. Cold iron, well made.

'I'll take this,' he said.

The legionary scowled, but he knew better than to argue.

'Back on watch, all of you. There might be any number of these painted bastards out tonight.' At that thought, the centurion realised he didn't want to come across them on his own. He picked a group of six tent mates, men he knew were reliable. 'You boys come with me to report. The rest of you keep your wits about you, all right? I'll take this blade to Legate Plautius. He'll want to see it.'

They murmured about his ancestry, of course. He pretended not to hear as he crunched across the shingle to the line of camps, delighted with the way the night had gone.

27

Caractacus waited for his brother. He had looked east at dawn, shading his eyes from the glory. His people gathered on the banks of the Medway as the sun passed overhead and eased down behind them. It was near mid-summer and the day was warm, but there was no sign of Togodumnus. By evening, Caractacus was hungry, sore and weary as he stood there, just waiting. When he saw the gleam of Roman legions coming, he knew.

Trinovante drums beat slowly on his side of the river. Thirty thousand Britons had come to that place and bent the knee to him. A dozen kings and their greatest warriors stood with the Catuvellauni, though they had thought Togodumnus would be there. An official truce had been declared in the face of the greater threat. All blood feuds and ancient grudges were set aside, ignored for a time. They had but one enemy.

The river Medway was wide. No one from Rome could know where clay banks jinked and turned beneath the surface. The Cantii were sure it could not be crossed. They

had destroyed the only bridge for seventy miles, hacking at ancient woodwork with their axes. Pieces had drifted downstream to be swept out to sea. Only the piles remained, ancient logs too deep to pull free, too wet to burn.

Caractacus thought his people could hold them on the Medway bank. If the men of Rome dared to wade in, his archers would answer. He was not afraid of that. In that sucking mud, against that current, the great river would drown every last one. Only the Thames to the north was wider, a river that rose and fell on tides like the breath of the world.

As the light began to fade, Caractacus came face to face with the enemy for the first time. Some small part of him still hoped to see his brother returning to his side, to tell him some scheme he'd never have thought of on his own. 'Listen to Togodumnus,' his father had always said. Caractacus grimaced in memory of the old man, strong to the point of death. His brother had always been the cautious one, the thinker. If Togodumnus had finally taken a risk and been killed because of it, it seemed a savage sort of jest.

He had heard the legions for a long time before he could actually see them. It seemed Roman armies moved with drums of their own, with soaring horns and the tramp of boots in step. None of the old tales had mentioned that, but it was true. They did not come as thieves in the night, but as conquerors, not caring who heard.

They halted on the southern bank, perhaps two hundred paces away across the waters. Caractacus saw their banners rise, held on long poles. The rest halted with shields raised, neat lines of gleaming gold and red,

embossed with symbols he did not know. They wore metal and leather and cloth, those men, with spears carried high on the march. He did not think they could throw them across that river, however.

The legions roared a challenge then – and, of course, his people answered, howling like wolves. Caractacus joined them. He needed those legions to be angry. If they saw the bare bridge piles or the smashed and ruined boats, they would know there was no easy path. Night was coming and they were in a strange land. Their officers would be asking about the delay, expecting battle. Their men would be weary from the march, frustrated and weary.

Caractacus wiped sweat from his brow. He needed his brother. It was all very well lining up on a river bank to shout and curse an enemy, but if they didn't rush across, he would need a plan for the coming days. He had already discovered it was hard even to feed an army. To give one good meal to thirty thousand warriors required firewood, pots, bowls, promises, threats – and precious gold coins with his father's face stamped on them. The worst of it was that he would need to do it all again the next day. If Togodumnus had been there . . . it was exactly the sort of problem he loved to solve. Caractacus sighed, cracking his neck with one hand. He had missed something, he was certain. Togodumnus would see whatever it was, cuffing Caractacus on the back of his head. The river raced by, at flood. It nagged at him, but he could not bring it to mind. Togodumnus was dead, he was sure. That thought kept returning, gnawing at his confidence.

In the summer's dark, the Romans lit torches and raised braziers on poles of iron. Caractacus could only watch in disbelief. There were a few fires on his side of the river,

but the legions lit many more. They seemed to bring a vast array of equipment with them as they marched, either on pack animals or their own backs. He was half-expecting new forts to rise along that river, though he supposed there was no point when the water itself was their rampart. If they feared some attack of the Britons, there was no sign of it. He scowled as he considered what that meant. The sight of tribes arrayed in a defensive position was no more than they had expected. They were the invaders, the attackers.

Togodumnus had gone with a raiding party and it didn't look like he was coming back. Caractacus had used the river like a shield. They had both worked against their natures and the result was no more than the legions wanted. It was enough to make him want to weep.

He stared across the river as if trying to commit it all to memory. They weren't going anywhere that night. They could not reach his people, but neither could they be attacked. He felt a twinge of worry. There it was again, the sense that he had forgotten something.

Though his eyes were sore, he did not think he would sleep. Caractacus glanced at three lads waiting to speak to him, just as a fourth joined them. Those boys gaped across the river, as he had been doing. They would not interrupt while the Romans showed their strength. The moment he turned from the river though, their duty would insist. Kings were sending their young sons, asking for orders. All Caractacus could think to do was wait, for the Romans to try to cross, for them to start to drown. He had war chariots and horses on his side, archers by the thousand, axemen ready to wade in blood. He trusted his people, even the land itself. Yet he was weighed down.

It had all come too fast, he realised. The Romans had crossed the channel from Gaul, thrown up forts, then marched inland the very next day. To have gathered the tribes so quickly was a miracle. Only Rome inspired that much dread. Men who would have argued all summer over anything else had just picked up a weapon and walked to face them.

In the light of torches, Caractacus saw something huge push through the trees. Mounted officers flanked it, but they were small in comparison. It was grey, with enormous ears and teeth tipped in gold. He saw one, then another and another. He felt his mouth open. They were beasts of legend, brought to his land by the Romans. Snakes writhed around their heads somehow, striking fear into him.

A thought came, like a cold hand on the small of his back. Could those beasts cross the river? Could they wade the Medway like giants of an older age? It felt as if the Romans wanted his people to see them, to know fear.

Across the river, lights began to go out. Further back, small fires remained for the legions to cook their food, but along the bank, the line of gold began to shrink. Caractacus watched in awe as each lamp and brazier was snuffed. The last thing he could see was the three elephants, facing across the waters like a challenge. He swallowed as the final lamps were put out. The fires seemed to grow brighter then, like stars in the night, spreading further than he could believe. The Romans were still there. He shuddered, feeling a sense of horror creep over him. They had brought monsters. They drew forts from the earth in no time at all. He needed Togodumnus. How could he ever stand alone, against such men?

*

Legate Aulus Plautius sat on a tree trunk his men had felled and trimmed to give him a seat. He yawned as he stared into a brazier of gleaming iron. He had eaten a mash of barley and salt fish that he endured whenever he was on campaign. With a little salt and olive oil, it kept the men strong and that was all that mattered. The clouds were light, thank the gods. He doubted he would get much sleep that night, but at least it didn't look like rain. Tents were damp things and not good for the health, he was sure. A man needed to be dry.

Plautius had gone without sleep a hundred times when he'd been in his twenties. In his fifties, it was a different matter. He knew he needed to snatch a few hours, or he would become slow and stupid sometime in the next afternoon. That was not an option for a field officer with fifteen thousand legionaries and the gods alone knew how many others looking to him. He yawned again. The emperor was still demanding reports every hour. Claudius was some way behind the lines with his praetorians, walking the white cliffs, declaiming lines from Livy or making eyes at his niece. Plautius had preferred the man when Claudius was being made to balance a bowl of soup on his head. There had been a kind of honesty in no dignity at all. The airs and graces of an emperor fitted him poorly, though Plautius would have bitten his own tongue before he'd have ever said so. A Roman legate could fall, at least as fast as Claudius had risen.

When one of his guards gave a low two-toned whistle, Plautius sighed and stood, his knees creaking painfully. Ridiculous for one who had run all the way around Rome as a young man!

He couldn't say he liked the Gauls he had brought

across. They were like terriers to his Roman wolf, as Plautius saw them – wiry little bastards who had never known a good meal. Yet they were willing to swim the river. That spoke well for them, and so he endured the powerful smell of old oil and wild onions – and their incomprehensible gibberish when they talked amongst themselves. Worse than the Britons, just about.

The smell was particularly bad tonight, he realised. The Gauls had coated themselves with some rancid grease, thick as winter snot. He almost gagged as the wind washed a gust of it past him.

‘Orders, general?’ said their leader.

Berica had the same accent as the rest, but he spoke passable Latin. Plautius knew he had been a slave somewhere in the south for his childhood, then signed up to kill for Rome when a plague took his family. Having a little Latin made him an officer over his fellows, but he was still one of them.

‘Cross the river,’ Plautius said. He belched into his fist, tasting fish and barley once more. ‘How many of you are there?’

‘Four hundred who can swim,’ Berica said. ‘We have around the same number who can’t. They’ll stay here.’

‘I see. You are to head downstream to a quiet spot – get across to the far bank as quickly as you can. Kill their horses, any sleeping men you find. Sow fear . . . like seeds, you understand?’

The Roman mimed throwing seeds onto the earth. The Gaul shrugged.

‘Then come back?’

‘Better that you hold. I will cross after you. Do you understand? You have my word. If you hold on, I will come.’

The man nodded. He saluted in a passable imitation of Roman style, then trotted off into the dark. Aulus Plautius shook his head, yawning once again. The Gauls were simple sorts, as trusting as children. Still, they were vicious little fighters as well. They would do a lot of damage on the other side of the river. And he *would* cross. He had not lied, not exactly. At that moment, he just wasn't sure how long it would take to lay a bridge over the piles he had seen.

Plautius had two thousand men cutting wood into thick planks, miles back. When the sun came up, they would have split and sawn enough timber to rebuild any bridge. Legionaries would hold up shields against arrows and his carpenters would hammer together some sort of way across. The Britons had never seen what a Roman legion could do, at least not since the first Caesar.

He thought of the three elephants. His men had been forced to wrap their chains around ancient oaks to stop them going into the river. Elephants liked water, apparently. Aulus could still hardly believe he was in charge of the ridiculous animals. Only the vanity of an emperor had brought them to that place, putting the lives of good men at risk. Yet Claudius wanted them to be used – and so Aulus Plautius would find a way to use them. Perhaps as a distraction.

The general spread out his cloak and wrapped it around him like a moth in a cocoon. The moon was high and he needed just a little sleep before the day began. His legions were a hammer, brought from all over the empire. He yawned. He would bring the thing down on the painted Britons . . . if he had to build a dozen bridges, or march to the headlands of the river . . . He drifted off, snoring lightly as stars moved overhead.

*

Caractacus woke and sat up, rubbing his face in the darkness. His dreams had been brutal and he was pleased to leave them. He looked at the stars, judging how long he had dozed. Not long, he thought. His senses sharpened as he heard horses whinnying. The tribes raided each other's lands for cattle and horses every winter. The first response was always to grab a weapon and charge.

Caractacus and half the Catuvellauni raced towards that sound, the alarm spreading. They found men, dripping and shivering in the cold, sticking cold iron into horses so that the animals shrieked and broke their ropes. The fight that followed was an ugly thing, without much glory in it. With only moonlight as a guide, Caractacus drew a sword and a long knife for his other hand, using them as he had trained all his life. He killed two of the wiry little men, then choked on the smell he had transferred to himself. It was some foul grease and with their wet leathers, it explained where they had come from. They still carried the river in their clothes and they were slow, just a touch slower than they might have been on a warm, dry day. His men slaughtered them all, losing only a dozen or so.

Caractacus grimaced. He had killed strangers, and it had been good. Yet the ones he had lost had been men he'd known all his life. As the sun rose, it did not seem a fair trade. He ordered the heads taken. If he'd had poles, he would have stuck them into the river bank as a warning for the enemy. As it was, his men only waited for enough light to be seen throwing them in.

Caractacus looked down at the flowing waters, frowning. The river had been at flood the night before. As the sun lit the Medway, the level had dropped alarmingly. He could actually see the shingle and sand of the bottom. He

swallowed, glancing suddenly at the Roman side. The tides. That was what Togodumnus would have remembered! He had forgotten the tides. As close to the sea as they were, the river dropped the height of a man. It was still wide, but if the Romans took a chance . . .

Caractacus jumped as horns sounded behind him. His mouth opened in shock at the sight of legion banners marching closer – on his side of the river. How were they there? How had they crossed?

Out on the river, he saw Romans gather shields around a team of men as they began to nail planks across the abandoned piles. The work went appallingly fast and he didn't have to shout orders for a hundred of his archers to trot over in that direction. They would slow it down, at least. The real problem was the Roman legion marching up from the south.

Caractacus sent a silent prayer to the Morrigan, his patron goddess.

'Save us today, old crow,' he said. That was all. Nothing else mattered.

He shouted to his bard and heard the man's horn call answered across the great camp. The tribes were ready to come to the line. Thirty thousand men were a nation on the march. He would have to leave some to hold the river banks, but . . .

'Carac!' It was one of the small kings, red-faced and panting. 'Those monstrous great beasts are bringing men across, further up. Can I take my lads?'

For an instant, Caractacus couldn't remember the man's name.

'Go on then!' he said. 'Fill them full of arrows. When you're finished, come back to me.'

The tribes gathered around him, in ranks. He knew each group stood with men they had known all their lives. It meant they could not run, not from anyone. Not while their sister's boy was watching, or the thatcher who had married their widowed mother, or the warrior who looked after their old dad. There were bonds there that would be hard to break. Yet fear swelled in him, even so. The Romans were stories and legends, gone never to return. Yet there they were – and he had to face them.

He marched forward – and in that moment, his cares fell away, like fish scales cut free. He couldn't run either. He would fight. If he won, it would be no more than right. If he lost, well, he would still have fought.

The land to the south and west was wide and dry, grassy meadows where deer and cattle browsed in normal times. Caractacus heard the rumble of war chariots as they gathered on the wings and showed his teeth. He hated Rome, he really did. They were coming from the front and behind and there he was in the middle, with a shield on his arm and good iron in his hand.

'Walk to them,' he called to those around him. His voice carried well and thousands heard. 'No running, now! There will be enough for all of you. We'll finish these – and then come back for the bastards at the river.'

Claudius walked along the very edge of white cliffs. The sea was hundreds of feet below and the wind was so strong he wondered if it might snatch him up. It seemed to press itself into his lungs and he took pleasure in the smell – salt and seaweed. The land was green there, cropped by wild hares or sheep.

Agrippina walked with him, her son trailing some way

back. She'd made a praetorian take Lucius' hand when the boy almost went over the edge. Lucius was still sticking out his bottom lip and sulking about that, but Claudius was in too fine a mood to let him spoil the day.

Imperial messengers still came and went, reporting from Rome as well as the campaign. The invasion of Britannia had begun very well, but that was not what filled Claudius with trembling excitement. No, he held a letter that had been written in Rome and taken by ship right around Hispania to reach his hand. The bundle of scrolls and papers that morning had seemed like any other. Yet it had included the one he'd waited for, the one that changed everything. It was weeks old in time, but new to him. He walked as if the wind filled him and made him light.

Claudius halted his praetorians, leaving them to keep Agrippina's little bullock quiet while he walked on, alone with her. There were no enemies nearby, no wild tribesmen. He halted where the air was cold and the sun shone.

'I have news from Rome, Agrippina,' he said. He composed himself in dignity then, keeping his eyes downcast. 'My wife . . . my poor Messalina. She was k-killed, stabbed on the street by some m-mapmaker. I don't know if he was trying to get to me, or whether it was a kidnap for m-money. He died in the attempt. We may never know his r-reasons.'

He closed his eyes for a moment, pressing the parchment against his chest. Agrippina took his free hand in hers.

'I'm so sorry, Claudius,' she said. Her words were almost drowned as the wind rose, whistling. He could only nod for a time.

'My children won't have a mother,' he said. 'I will have

no companion, no wife to share all this . . . ? He gestured, taking in the vast bay, stretching white and green into the distance. He claimed it all with the sweep of an arm.

A little way off, Claudius saw her son break free, twisting his hand out of the praetorian's grip. The emperor tightened his lips, promising himself both boy and man would be whipped. He watched as Lucius scrambled up the slope towards him, suspicion in every line of him. The fat little lip stuck out and Lucius waved his hands like a street trader. Claudius forced a smile as Agrippina took her son's arm, much more gently than he would have.

'The praetorians said I shouldn't . . . ?' Lucius began.

His mother turned on him.

'Be silent, Lucius. The emperor speaks.'

Claudius inclined his head, pleased.

'I . . . what w-was I saying? That I would have no w-wife to share . . . ?' He stumbled then, his stammer returning with the boy watching.

'The ca-campaign is going well, my dear,' he went on, feeling the moment slip away. 'I believe I will be able to c-call my son "Britannicus". Yet I will return . . . to lonely rooms. Without M-Messalina.'

'I . . . ?' Agrippina began. 'Oh, Claudius, I do have words for you, but I can't say them. It is too soon after such news.'

He looked at her, his eyes dark and deep with longing.

'You can say anything to me, anything at all. You m-must know my . . . m-marriage was a cold thing, an ember. Agrippina, I wonder if you know, if you have g-guessed what you've come to m-mean to me.'

The boy's face twisted in disbelief as he looked from his mother to the emperor. Lucius rubbed his nose with his free hand as both adults ignored him.

‘I am free, Agrippina,’ Claudius went on. ‘If you would have m-me, I would be your h-h-husband. I have c-come to love you and I w-would m-make you my w-wife.’

‘I’ve never known a man like you,’ she said.

There were tears in her eyes, Lucius noted with surprise. He had not seen such a thing before, not from his mother. He saw she was nodding, stepping into an embrace.

‘Yes, Claudius. I will marry you,’ she said. She pressed her head against his chest, though her back ached to do it.

28

Aulus Plautius watched Vespasian engage the tribes on the other side of the river. The legate fretted as he stood there. It wasn't just the frustration of waiting for his bridge to be finished, it was also the fact that he disliked Vespasian. The younger man was one of those ambitious sorts who never failed to get under Aulus' skin. Vespasian was just a little too loud when he laughed. Oh, he was clever enough, but he wasn't a fighter, not as Aulus was. He clapped men on the back and thought he understood them, but there was a difference. Plautius didn't trust him an inch. If the success of the campaign hadn't depended on getting across the river, he'd have been delighted to leave Vespasian to be cut apart by a force of savages.

The legate scowled. Unless he managed to defeat them, of course. He'd be the emperor's favourite then, granted a laurel wreath. All men had to rise and bow whenever one of those fortunate sons entered a public arena. Vespasian had even talked of winning one on the campaign, he

recalled. Plautius made a vulgar sign with his fingers, pushing his thumb through the second and third so the tip poked out. Cocky little whoreson. Perhaps some stinking tribesman would gut him.

He paced up and down on the south bank, watching the bridge team creep from pile to pile. The fighting was terrible on the other side. He felt like he could almost reach out and touch the men as they were driven forward and back. If he could get over there . . .

Plautius looked down at the river. The tide had gone out, though he didn't really understand the process. He had grown up inland and had never heard of waters rising and falling like this. Yet he could see the riverbed – and more, he could see a great bank of clay, like a shining road. The river ran fast over that paler surface, but it wasn't so deep there, nowhere near what it had been the night before.

'Optio!' Plautius snapped to one standing nearby.

The man came up and saluted.

'Put a rope on one of your men and have him walk across – over that bank. If he goes under, pull him out. If he reaches the other side, we all go.'

The officer saluted and picked one of his men before the fellow could edge away. Plautius watched as a rope was found and secured, the single legionary skidding and sliding down the bank until he stood knee-deep. He began to remove his helmet and chestplate.

'Keep those on, would you?' Plautius called down to him. 'I need to know if the rest of us can cross. Quickly now!'

The man grimaced, but made no protest as he waded out. Plautius watched as the waters reached his waist. The

legate held his own breath then, waiting to see if he would drop below the surface. He'd probably drown if he did, before they could pull him out.

A dozen senior officers wandered over. They'd heard something was going on and they all wanted to see more action than just watching it on the other side. A couple of them cheered the man as he waded on, never slowing.

The enemy saw him coming. As he reached the other side and began to haul himself up, one of their archers spotted the Roman and sent an arrow through his side. He fell back into the water and the men spooling out the rope let it go slack.

'Good enough,' Aulus said grimly. He raised his voice to the sort of volume that could stun a man. 'By cohort! In order! Legions to advance!'

They had been ready to cross the bridge. He glanced over to that part of the river bank, wondering whether to abandon the work. No, it wouldn't hurt to finish it. He watched as the first and second cohorts stormed in, wading like maniacs. When some of the Britons tried to hold the far bank, they were met by thrown spears, pinning them to the earth.

Plautius watched in satisfaction as they gained a foothold on the other side. They would wait there, holding the spot for the rest of his force to come across. He cracked his knuckles. Vespasian wouldn't get all the glory.

He was about to step into the water when he recalled that the emperor would want to hear. The legate gestured to a messenger.

'Carry these words for me, would you? Ask Emperor Claudius if he wishes us to take slaves or not.'

The messenger looked blank and Plautius sighed.

‘It means the victory is ours,’ he said. ‘I will drive them before me now. Let the emperor know.’

Caractacus understood at last how the Romans had taken an empire. When his men tired, they were cut down, but the legions somehow pulled back their front rank and replaced them from behind. It meant his Catuvellauni faced fresh blood, over and over. Then there were the spears of iron and wood, thrown hard and yet somehow bending on impact so they could not be thrown back. He had seen his men curse as they tried to use them.

The legions fought in tight formation, short swords stabbing out high and low. A man could block a good blow only to feel something jabbing at his groin. Those wounds were terrible, with blood gouting down legs and men slipping away even as they stood and shouted defiance.

It was a slaughter. His war chariots had done well against the Roman flanks, killing hundreds there. His Iceni archers had made savage work and then thrown themselves into the enemy, taking as many as they could with them as they died. Yet they did die.

They’d had a chance, Caractacus knew it, until the legions had found a fording point across the river. After that, he’d lost thousands of his people, caught between two forces and squeezed out like a pip. All he could do then was order them to retreat from the field, to slip past the legion they had battered first and hardest.

Those men were happy to see them go and did not pursue as he pulled back to the north. He’d find a spot on the Thames to make a stand. That river was old and wider than the Medway. If the Romans crossed even that, he

knew he would have to go into the west, to deep forests and mires where men could hide out for years.

That was a sorrow for another day, however. He found himself on a road, trudging along with white dust to his knees, while Roman legions roared in triumph at his back. He had lost and the tribes were stunned as they looked to him. All their dead would lie unburied. Perhaps the crows of the Morrigan would visit them then, he thought. He never would.

Something was bothering Lucius, Agrippina could tell. The little boy stared out to sea, while a Roman camp was built around him. Claudius had said he wanted to see the field of battle and he was off with his officers, basking in the glorious victory. They had made a good bridge over the river, she'd heard. Claudius had been able to ride across without getting his feet wet. An emperor's privilege.

She bit her lip as she saw her son's grim countenance. It was not like Lucius, but she had an idea as to the cause. He had been present when Claudius asked her to marry him. He may not have understood what it meant, she didn't know.

She sat down beside her son and spread out the tiles he liked to match in pairs. He ignored her for a while, but she saw his eyes flicker over the shapes she revealed before he looked away. He had a good memory and he liked to impress her.

'You look a little sad, Lucius. Is it that I'm getting married?'

He made a scornful expression.

'No, it's not that. It's . . . you have forgotten my father – and Italus.'

She shook her head. It clearly was that, just as she'd expected.

'I haven't forgotten either of them. Fate takes good men away sometimes. Men like my father, my brothers. All we can do is endure.'

He shrugged.

'Is there something else?' she said.

He looked at her, his eyes dark. His hair was wild and black, his neck thicker than any other lad of his age. Some of it was fat, but a boy could eat whatever he wanted, at least while he was growing. There was muscle there too. The men called him Taurulus – the little bull. The thought made her smile.

'Uncle Claudius is going to call his son "Britannicus". I heard him say it.'

Agrippina blinked. She hadn't thought that was the sort of thing that would concern him. It seemed she had been mistaken.

'What of it?' she said.

He scowled.

'Where's my name? If he marries you, I'll be his son, but he didn't give one to me. He didn't even think of me.'

Agrippina looked around her. For once, there was no one close by. Even the emperor's spies weren't interested in what she might say to her son.

'It is his right, Lucius, to call his son any name he wants. Little Tiberius will inherit Rome. And "Britannicus" is a good name for an emperor.'

'If it was me . . .' he said. His voice was soft, but there was defiance in it. 'I would call myself Gnaeus Ahenobarbus. Or Emperor Gnaeus Italus.'

His mother clenched her jaw, suddenly irritated with him.

‘No, you would not, Lucius. If you became emperor, *I* would choose the name for you and you would accept it without scowling like that.’ She thought for a moment. ‘I would name you after my brother, to honour him. Yes. If you were emperor, you would take his name. You would be Nero.’

Historical Note

Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus – father to Nero – was the grandson of Mark Antony and a member of the Equites class – second only to the senate and accustomed to both wealth and authority. Details of his casual violence – blinding a social equal, strangling a slave, riding a child down on the Appian Way – are all from accounts of the period. Perhaps it is not surprising he told Agrippina that nothing good could ever come from them. She was married to him at just thirteen and bore him only one child at twenty-two, when Gnaeus was thirty-nine. Gnaeus Ahenobarbus was then accused of adultery with a senator's wife. He was liable to be imprisoned or even executed. The fall of Sejanus saved him.

Sejanus was prefect of the praetorians and Emperor Tiberius' most trusted man in Rome. He was part of the reorganisation that took the praetorians from around 4,500 (symbolically, one cohort fewer than a normal legion) to 6,000. (Latin doesn't have a letter 'j', so Sejanus would have been known as 'Sei-anus', just as 'Iesu' was the Latin form of Jesus, crucified during the reign of Tiberius in AD 33.)

The man Tiberius left in charge of Rome for years had grown rather accustomed to the role. As prefect, Sejanus had statues made showing Tiberius and himself as equals. He staged celebrations for his birthday with the sort of

lavish expenditure only an emperor would have known. He must have believed Tiberius would never come back from Capri, but he was wrong.

Tiberius was a horror of ancient Rome, who tainted or destroyed anything he touched. Taking young Gaius Caesar – Caligula – to Capri might have seemed like a good idea to the family. After the deaths of Caligula's two older brothers, he was by then the only surviving son and sole heir to Rome. Details of Tiberius' parties on Capri are too grim to relate, but the young man who came back was filled with rage and violence.

Though he was very ill, Tiberius returned without warning to remove the pretender to the throne, a strike of almost surgical neatness. He had Sejanus strangled and his body thrown down the Gemonian steps on the Capitoline hill in Rome. By Roman standards, it was a merciful end.

In the process of questioning slaves and all other interested parties, however, Tiberius then learned his son and heir Drusus had actually not died of natural causes, but had been poisoned. Sejanus was responsible, but rather inconveniently, was already dead. Tiberius lashed out at the man's friends, wife and children, killing them all.

Note on Drusus: No writer would choose so many characters with essentially the same name. There were at least three called 'Drusus' around this period, as well as one 'Drusilla'. The first was the natural son of Tiberius with his first wife. That Drusus was the one who seemed to die from natural causes but was later revealed to have been

poisoned. The second was an early son of Claudius, one Claudius Drusus. He died in childhood.

The third was part of the family of Agrippina the Elder, wife to Germanicus and mother to Agrippina here. Her surviving children were: Nero Julius Caesar, Drusus Julius Caesar, Gaius Augustus Caesar, Julia Agrippina, Julia Livilla and Julia Drusilla. (It is fairly clear that Agrippina the Elder wanted her children's bloodline to be known.)

Note: The name 'Germanicus' was actually first given to a grandfather, then inherited by the son who triumphed in Germania – an early example of nominative determinism, perhaps, where a name can shape choices made.

When Tiberius had Sejanus arrested, he replaced him with Naevius Macro, previously head of the vigiles, a lesser force more akin to a night watch in Rome. Macro was rumoured to have been present at the death of Tiberius. It isn't known if Caligula was with him, though it seems likely. Macro committed suicide, though a little earlier than I have it here and only when Caligula stripped his titles from him.

The detail of Tiberius being smothered comes from the writer Tacitus. The exact details of how an emperor dies cannot always be known with certainty. Rumours spring up and grow in the telling.

Caligula's first wife, Junia Claudilla, did indeed die in childbirth with a baby boy. Caligula is said to have killed her father on the spot, to take a message to his dead wife before her spirit fled too far. That too cannot be

confirmed, but it certainly accords with all we know about the man.

Who can say what Caligula's life might have been if she and her son had lived? He would not have feared Agrippina or her heir. He would not have banished her, taking her son's inheritance and leaving her family destitute. For part of his childhood, Lucius was indeed left with an aunt and raised in squalid conditions with a male ballet dancer and a barber. History sometimes hinges on a single event – and that birthing room, still and bloody, was one.

It is also true that one of Caligula's first acts as emperor was to murder a potential rival – Gemellus – and to retrieve his mother's ashes, returning them to the huge mausoleum of Augustus in Rome. There was hope for him, despite the damage done in his years on Capri with Tiberius.

The will of Emperor Tiberius conferred rule on both Caligula and that surviving cousin, Gemellus – born a twin, though his brother had died. As a boy Gemellus had also been with Tiberius and Caligula on Capri. It is possible he was mentally damaged in some way. Two separate sources refer to him being a child right into adulthood.

Caligula moved quickly after the death of Tiberius, presumably because he had more up-to-date information than anyone else. He persuaded both consuls to nullify the will – and that was the end for Gemellus. I moved his final scene to the island of Pontia over Rome. Poor Gemellus was made to commit suicide in the same year, an act that was both brutal and yet utterly ordinary for the time.

*

Caligula ruled for just four years, killed at the age of twenty-eight in AD 41. He was murdered by his own praetorian guard, which in itself gives a sense of the savagery they had endured from him. I didn't use the fact that one of his assassins – Cassius Chaerea – was said to have been driven to violence by the constant taunt that he was womanly.

Famously, they found his uncle Claudius hiding from the violence and declared him the successor. The senate might even then have resisted, but the praetorians were in control and Claudius became emperor. He was married to a heavily pregnant Messalina, with a son born a few months after his accession. Claudius had Agrippina brought back from exile and eventually restored the inheritance Caligula had taken.

Claudius is an interesting figure from the period. He survived Caligula, while many others did not – and seems to have done so by being no threat at all. He was physically weak, of course. He was small, with both a speech impediment and a limp. Yet he had written histories in Greek and Latin and was at least a man of letters, if not politically astute. As emperor, he set about expanding the territory of Rome – as far apart as modern-day Slovenia, and of course, the first really successful invasion of Britain.

Claudius had an understanding of resources, so that tin mines and prized slaves made Britain a fine prospect for conquest. He was easily as ruthless as any other emperor of the period, though much less capricious than Caligula. (As a side note, there is no actual record of Caligula making his horse Incitatus a consul. He threatened to do so, perhaps as a comparison to senators he thought were

fools. He did give his favourite horse its own slaves and a level of comfort not usually found in stables. Yet he does not appear to have actually appointed it to the highest office in Rome after the imperial family.)

Note: I have skated lightly over some of the more complex and incestuous relationships. Messalina was the daughter of Domitia Lepida, for example, so related to Agrippina's first husband and her son Lucius. Whether she actually had multiple lovers or plotted against her husband is hard to assess at this distance. Writers like Tacitus and Suetonius were certain of it, but history is not written by those ground under its wheel. We can never know for certain if Messalina even sent the assassins who tried to kill Lucius – and were repelled by a snakeskin. It is true that Agrippina had that skin made into a bracelet. Her son wore it all his life as a good-luck charm. Yet all that is sure is that Messalina and Agrippina clashed – and it was Messalina who was executed for conspiring against the emperor. I have cut out a few years, but she was killed around AD 48, still in her twenties. It's clear enough that she is one of those characters who could support a book on their own, but this is not her story.

Agrippina's second husband was actually named Gaius Sallustius Passienus Crispus. I couldn't have yet another Gaius, and the continuing influence of Monty Python forces me to avoid names like 'Crispus' and 'Silius'. I called him 'Italus' throughout and used him to fill some gaps in the history, such as how Agrippina returned from exile. The real Passienus was twice made consul and was vastly wealthy. Agrippina inherited that fortune when he died,

almost certainly by poison and at her hand. She was intent on making a run at Claudius – and her decent and thoroughly honourable second husband was just in the way.

The AD 43 invasion of Britain is fairly well known. Emperor Claudius wanted to add new territory to the empire, perhaps to show he deserved to rule. The first landings were overseen by Legate Aulus Plautius. Claudius crossed Gaul to be part of the initial push. He is said to have embarked at Gesoriacum on the north coast, modern Boulogne, where Caligula had built a lighthouse. The landings were on the beaches of Kent, a little further north than Julius Caesar before him. War elephants actually were part of the invasion force – giving a sense of how well organised Claudius was to bring them halfway across the world and all the way to Britain.

In all, Claudius landed four full legions (twenty thousand, with at least ten thousand in support) and any number of auxiliary troops from other regions of the empire. Trade did go on between the empire and Britain before Claudius invaded, though it was a collection of tribal fiefdoms and small kingdoms, such as the Cantii of Kent and the Catuvellauni, still powerful almost a century after Julius Caesar's landings in 54 BC. Legion II under Vespasian – a name on the rise – landed on the south coast, near modern Chichester. We know Legions IX and XIV landed in Kent.

Claudius' initial intention may have been to annex only the south for mines, oysters and good arable land. Continuing resistance drew in greater and greater resources, however. It took decades of fighting before Britain could be

considered a settled colony. The Roman presence would last until AD 410.

Claudius spent around two weeks in Britain. He had his victory, though it was neither as neat or as quick as he had wanted. More importantly, he was able to give his son the name 'Britannicus' from then on.

Note: Beer was made in a number of places in the ancient world. The people of Greece and Rome preferred wine, but beer was produced in places like ancient Egypt, Britain and Ireland from barley. The exact origin is unknown, but with natural yeasts fermenting stored crops, it has to be one of the oldest human activities, right up there with tanning leather and, of course, making war.

The battle of Medway took place in Kent, England. The sons of Cunobelin – Caractacus and Togodumnus – had unified the tribes of the south. They were able to call on a huge number of warriors to resist the invasion, gathering them on the bank of a fast-flowing river. It's impossible to say how wide it was two thousand years ago, but it is rarely narrower than two hundred paces today, at any point. There is a story of Roman auxiliaries swimming across, though that would have had limited use. The most likely truth is that the legions found a fording point. They drove the tribes north to the Thames where they fought again. Caractacus escaped into Wales, where he continued to fight for some years. His story has more to tell.

When Messalina was killed, Claudius was free to ask another to marry him. He had shown all the ones who ever doubted he was the right choice to be emperor. He

had won a vast territory for Rome, with new wealth and a flood of trade goods. Though he was in his fifties, he chose Agrippina.

One of Aesop's tales involved a farmer who found a frozen snake and chose to warm it against his chest, only to have it rouse and sink its fangs into him. We pity the man; can we pity the snake, acting out its nature? It has been a joy to tell her story – and the first years of the boy who would become Nero.

Conn Iggulden, London, 2022

