

# The Emperor's Knives

*Empire: Volume Seven*

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HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

# Prologue

*Rome, September AD 184*

‘Excuse me for bothering you sir. Do I have the honour of addressing Sextus Dexter Bassus?’

The man in the doorway nodded, playing a forbidding look over the two men standing before him in the small but neat front garden of his house, rendered private from the main road that climbed the Aventine Hill by a substantial wall that ran all the way around the property’s modest grounds. His look of irritation was due in no small part to the fact that the unexpected callers had summarily dismissed the slave who had opened the door to them, peremptorily telling him to fetch his master on the apparent grounds of the matter at hand’s ‘sensitivity’.

‘You do. And you are?’

The taller of the two men, who seemed to be doing the talking for them both, smiled in a self-deprecating manner.

‘Me? A man of no great importance, although this may help to establish my bona fides in the matter I am desirous of discussing with you.’ The caller lifted the end of his belt to display a stylised tri-form spearhead decoration in polished silver. ‘This, Dexter Bassus, is the badge of a beneficiarius, a man chosen to give trusted service to one of his military superiors. In my own humble case I am just such a man, in the service of an extremely high-ranking military officer. His absolute need to stay nameless in this matter means that I am in turn required to nurture a similar desire for anonymity. I’m afraid that all I can tell you here, on your doorstep, is that my visit concerns events that occurred in the province of Britannia a little over two years ago.’

Bassus leaned forward, his eyes narrowing.

‘If this is about my brother—’

A raised hand stopped him in mid-sentence, the self-assured nature of the unnamed messenger’s gesture making him start backwards a fraction despite himself.

‘There’s nothing more to be said out here, I’m afraid, Dexter Bassus. If I might just come inside for a moment, I’m sure that everything will become clear . . .’

Bassus looked past the beneficiarius at the man waiting patiently behind him who was, if not completely ragged in his state of dress, demonstrating a robust attitude towards the requirements of both fashion and the regard of his fellow citizens. His eyes were roaming the modest garden with a faraway look, as if he’d never seen such a thing in all of his life.

‘And who’s this? Another one of your “high-ranking officer’s” men?’

The other man laughed, evidently amused with the idea.

‘Silus? Not likely! Silus is a man of the streets, and not accustomed to the workings of the Palatine, *if* you take my meaning?’

Bassus’s eyebrows raised at the mention of the hill upon which the imperial palaces and the throne’s sprawling bureaucracy had taken root.

‘The Palatine?’

The caller smiled thinly.

‘I can say no more. As to my companion here, I keep him handy whenever I travel through the city alone, especially at this time of the evening. And there are risks connected with my visit to your house that go well beyond the simple danger of robbery with violence. I can make it no plainer for you, I’m afraid – either we discuss this matter in a more private place, such as your study, or both Silus and I will simply vanish from your door, never to trouble you again. I will tell my sponsor that you chose to be uncooperative, and he in turn will resign himself to your never knowing the truth about what happened in Britannia. It really is very much up to you.’

Bassus thought for a moment, clearly torn between caution and curiosity.

'You can come in, but that man has a look to him that I don't care for. He can wait in the garden.'

Silus smiled, a disquieting vision given the state of his teeth, and his employer mirrored his expression with a nod of agreement that was almost a bow.

'How delightful for him! Silus is enormously fond of gardens, given his rather plain accommodation in the Subura district. I'm sure he'll be more than happy to enjoy the fruits of your gardener's labour in this pleasant evening's warmth, while you and I discuss our business with a little more privacy than can be achieved on your doorstep.'

Bassus waited until the bodyguard had strolled away to sit on one of his stone benches before ushering the mystery visitor through the doorway and into the cool of the house. The man took two steps and stopped, looking about him with evident approval.

'Very nice, Dexter Bassus, very nice indeed! Someone in your household clearly has the most exquisite taste in interior decoration . . . The lady of the house, perhaps, or possibly a particularly talented slave? Whoever it is, you're a lucky man!'

Bassus grunted a perfunctory agreement and ushered the visitor into his private office, scowling at the room's door as it creaked loudly on its hinges. He indicated a chair facing his desk, behind which he installed himself while the other man lowered himself into a sitting position with a slight grimace.

'My back isn't all that it used to be, I'm afraid. All those years on horseback criss-crossing the empire at the emperor's behest have quite taken the spring out of me, as you can see . . .'

He waited a moment, as if inviting Bassus into his conversation, but the other man only stared at him in bemusement.

'I know, not the subject you invited me in to discuss, and I apologise. A man who has previously enjoyed robust good health does have the irritating habit of sharing the smallest aches and pains with all and sundry when they eventually catch up with him.' He smiled into his host's darkening frown. 'Yes indeed, to business! You are, Sextus Dexter Bassus, the brother of one Quintus Dexter Bassus, are you not?'

Bassus shook his head, his voice laced with irritation.

‘We’ve already established that!’

The visitor leaned back in his chair with a smile, steeping his fingers.

‘Forgive my unavoidable disagreement, but in point of fact, Dexter Bassus, we have *not*. When I mentioned Britannia out there on your doorstep, you promptly asked if your brother was involved, but you didn’t ever actually mention his name. Precision is a quality for which I am known, and I cannot afford to allow that reputation to be sullied by a moment’s inattention. So—’

‘Yes!’ Bassus sat forward, slapping the desk and fixing his guest with a hard stare, his patience clearly at its limits. ‘I am the youngest brother of Quintus Dexter Bassus, who was, before you spend another lifetime working your way around to the question, the tribune and commanding officer of the Second Tungrian Cohort in northern Britannia. He died two years ago in the uprising that overran the frontier wall built by the Emperor Hadrian, and he left me, his only surviving sibling, as the owner of this house. Does that cover all of your questions?’

‘Not quite.’

Bassus sat back again with an expression of dismay that was bordering on something more than irritation.

‘I think I should have you thrown—’

The messenger spoke over him without any change in his expression.

‘Yes, I think you probably should, Dexter Bassus, but you’re not going to show me the door, not yet. For one thing, you don’t know to which of the empire’s esteemed military men, a well-regarded senator by the way, you might be giving offence, and for another . . .’ He smiled faintly at the big man. ‘The circumstances of your brother’s death were never made clear to you, were they? Or, indeed what happened to his wife, your sister-in-law. You’ll remember her quite well, I’d imagine, given that this was *her* house?’

Bassus looked at him with a different expression, his anger of a moment before replaced by something approaching horror.

*'No . . .'*

The visitor pursed his lips and shrugged without any discernible sympathy for the man sitting opposite as his bad news sank in.

'Well, as it happens, very much *yes*, I'm afraid. The lady in question survived the barbarian attack quite neatly, and as you would expect, eventually remarried. Her new husband is an officer in the First Tungrian Cohort, a nice young man, indeed in point of fact, more of a gentleman really, the son of a senator. He's almost supernaturally skilled with just about any weapon you can name; the result, I am reliably informed, of his having trained with both a soldier and a gladiator throughout his youth. Recently, however, he's fallen on hard times . . .' The beneficiarius leaned forward to confide in his host, lowering his voice to a stage whisper. 'His father was unfortunate enough to get himself executed for treason, you see. You might recall the excitement in the city at the time, when Appius Valerius Aquila was accused of plotting against the emperor? There was no truth in it, but since when did that ever stop an emperor like Commodus when he takes a fancy to a man's estate? I believe the Aquila villa was even possessed of a small private arena, which I would imagine made it impossible for the young emperor to resist, given his known predilection for a gladiator.'

He sat back again with a smile that was bordering on the beatific.

'So, to sum up, your brother dies, by his own men's swords I should add – he seems to have been a little too keen on the stricter aspects of military discipline from the sound of it – and leaves his young wife, the legal owner of this house, a widow. She then marries a rather dangerous young man who seems to go through anyone and anything that gets in his way, like a spearpoint through tunic wool, and they manage to survive the rest of the war with the tribes. Not to mention at least one attempt by the imperial authorities to bring him to justice. And now they're here.'

Bassus jerked bolt upright in his chair.

*'Here?'*

‘Well not here, as such, but they are less than a mile away, living in the military transit barracks on the Ostian road. And yes, I can only imagine what must be going through your mind . . .’

A loud crash echoed through the house followed by the sound of a woman’s voice raised in protest from the room above them. The beneficiarius raised his eyebrows, tipping his head to the study door.

‘Trouble in the kitchen, from the sound of it! Mind you, I expect your wife will be on top of the problem. Probably better if we leave her to it?’

The sound of footsteps sounded on the floorboards above them, and then down the stairs as the woman of the house evidently came from whatever she had been doing to investigate. Silence fell, and the beneficiarius leaned forwards again with his eyebrows raised in question.

‘So, Sextus Dexter Bassus, the question is this: what do you think we should do about this change in your circumstances? After all, it probably isn’t going to be very long before this rather excitable young man appears at your door with his wife and demands that you vacate *her* property . . .’

Bassus looked down at his hands for a moment.

‘I’m not like my brother . . . he was always the forceful one. Do you think . . .’

‘Do I think what, Dexter Bassus? Do I think I could help? Possibly. You want this whole problem to go away, I presume? It wouldn’t be cheap.’

The answer was instant.

‘I have money! Not enough to buy a house like this, but enough to reward you generously for any help that you could provide in . . . relieving me of this problem. Would five . . . no, *ten* thousand sestertii be enough?’

The beneficiarius shook his head with a hint of sadness.

‘More than enough to employ a man like Silus, much more, but then a man like Silus isn’t going to be capable of dealing with this problem. This will require a team of men, and one in particular with the cunning to lure this young man into a carefully designed

trap. A man like me, to be precise.' He inspected his fingernails for a moment. 'And I have a sum more of the order of twenty-five thousand in mind.'

The room was silent for a moment while Bassus digested the offer, and silence hung over the house beyond the study's stout wooden door. When he answered his voice was edged with incredulity.

'*Twenty-five thousand sesterii?* But that's—'

'Everything you have? Not quite. At this point in time, you have this lovely town house, and your good health to boot. There might well come a time not far in the future when you have neither, unless this young man is stopped from carrying through his plans to dispossess you of his wife's property.'

Bassus nodded disconsolately.

'Very well, half now and half when the job is complete and proven to my satisfaction.'

He stood, shaking his head and muttering under his breath, going round the desk and stooping to prise a floor tile up from its place, reaching into the gap beneath it to pull out a good-sized purse. To his surprise the visitor stood up, stretched with a grimace and then called out in a loud voice.

'Very well, Silus, we're in here!'

With the same slow creak of hinges in need of oil, the study's door opened, revealing the bodyguard standing stock-still in the frame. His face and tunic were spattered with blood, and a long dagger dangled from his right hand in an almost nonchalant manner. Bassus gaped at him, finding his voice after a long pause.

'You . . .'

Words failed him, and the nameless messenger nodded helpfully.

'Killed your cook, her husband the butler, their daughter the kitchen servant and lastly your wife? That does seem to be the inescapable conclusion. And yes, *obviously* you're next, now that you've paid to have young Marcus Valerius Aquila murdered. Your desire for the problem to go away will be honoured in full, but just not for your benefit. More for mine, really.'



Bassus shrank back against the wall behind him, his face twisted in terror as Silus advanced into the room, looking to his master for the signal to make the last kill.

‘You . . . you were just waiting for me to show you where the money was!’

The anonymous visitor smiled again, shaking his head with a sad smile.

‘Not really. Did you not wonder how my price just *happened* to coincide precisely with the amount of money you have left from that which you inherited when your brother died? There actually was enough there to buy you a nice place, wasn’t there? Not quite this pleasant, but good enough and in a respectable area. Greed got the better of you, I’d imagine. Why buy a house when you already had one, since your brother’s wife showed no sign of returning home, eh? I’ve known what you’re worth down to the last sestertius for a while now, and where you hide the money, but robbery was never my aim. I didn’t want to steal your money, I wanted you to pay me to deal with the Aquila boy, a job which I can assure you I’ll carry through to the full extent of your rather heavy purse and beyond, if need be.’

Bassus shook his head in disbelief.

‘So why . . . ?’

He waved a hand at the bloody knife, his mouth opening and closing silently.

‘Why kill you all? Because I need this house as part of the plan to fulfil your last orders, that’s why, and you and the rest of your household would at best have been inconvenient loose ends.’

A waved hand set Silus in motion, walking slowly around the desk with his dagger held ready. He raised the knife, speaking to Bassus in a matter-of-fact tone that was clearly calculated to soothe the panicking victim in his last moments.

‘Keep nice and still mate. It’ll be a lot quicker and less painful if you do.’

Bassus looked about him frantically for a way out of his predicament, but before he could make any move the knife man stepped forward quickly, whipping his dagger up and thrusting it deeply

into the point where his cowering victim's neck and shoulder met in the classic street executioner's stroke.

*'Ah! You bast . . .'*

Clutching reflexively at the wound with blood squirting between his fingers, he tottered, stepped forward one seemingly drunken pace, and then stopped, swaying on the spot. Eyes rolling upwards as consciousness failed, he slumped to the floor and lay still, a puddle of blood spreading from the wound with one small rivulet trickling down into the underground hiding place from which he had taken the purse. The beneficiarius looked down at him with an expression of pity.

*'How disappointingly stupid. He fell for the beneficiarius story the moment he saw this meaningless piece of silver.'* He lifted the belt end, smiling down at the faked symbol of patronage. *'Even when whatever it was that broke during your struggle out there hit the floor, he still wasn't bright enough to realise what was happening until you came through the door.'* He shook his head. *'Never mind. Clearly we perform a service to the gods on days like these, ridding this world of the more credulous of our fellow citizens and leaving more room for clever fellows like you and I, eh Silus?'* He slapped the blood-spattered murderer on a relatively clean section of his arm. *'And well done for a neatly concluded job! Let's get all that blood washed off the floor and walls shall we, and decide what to do with the bodies?'*

The gory bodyguard stood and looked at him for a moment before speaking.

*'Doesn't it worry you to be alone with a murderer and more gold than I've ever seen in my life, with no one else to hand or even knowing that we're here?'*

His employer raised a sardonic eyebrow, half his face shadowed in the dim evening light filtering through the study's high window.

*'You only ask from curiosity, of course?'*

Silus looked down at his bloody knife.

*'That's right, only my curiosity.'*

*'Well in that case I shall enlighten you as to the source of my boundless confidence with regard to your continued flawless*

execution of my orders. And it really is *very* simple. Once a day, every day, I report to a very, very important man. I provide him with the information I glean as I go about my job, information which is *particularly* important to him. He expects results from me, Silus, and I expect that he would be more than vexed if the admittedly small matter of my death were to get in the way of my achieving those results. Be assured that he knows all about you, and indeed all about the seemingly immeasurable number of family members whose main breadwinner you would appear to be – how many children is it that you have?’

‘Seven.’

His employer clapped his hands together softly.

‘Seven indeed, and they all survived the plague the last time it stalked the city? That really is quite astonishing good luck! I know of whole families that were wiped out in less than a week. You’re a lucky man, Silus, but it might just be that you’ve used up all that luck. Were I to go missing, even for a day, this man is the type to assume the worst and set investigators on my trail. A trail which I have ensured will lead straight to your door. So, were you to make this simple and entirely understandable mistake, you would soon enough find yourself and every one of your seven children, and that fat wife of yours and her brother, and his wife and children too, all enjoying a brief unscheduled trip to dark rooms buried far beyond any thought of rescue. There are men who ply their trade in those badly lit places, Silus, who make a simple schemer like me and a murdering thug like you appear to be men of the highest virtue. Your family, once in their power, would be abused, degraded and tortured in ways that even a man with your broad experience of the world cannot begin to imagine, since these men’s depravity is limited only by the bounds of their particularly savage imaginations.’

He stared at the killer for a moment, opening his arms wide.

‘So if you’d like to play through that possible future for your family, you go right ahead and put the knife into me.’

Silus shook his head.

‘No, my curiosity is quite satisfied. Funny though . . .’

His employer raised an eyebrow.

‘What is?’

‘I was just thinking that you’re not quite right in the head, if you don’t mind me saying so.’

The other man smiled at him broadly.

‘Many men have tried to offend me Silus, it’s in the nature of my business to attract insults, but very few of them have ever succeeded. After all, none of this is personal, it’s simply business. And trust me, there is a method in my apparent madness. I have a plan that will bring this man Aquila to justice at last, and in doing so more than likely perform the other task that my rather impatient sponsor wishes to see completed. So, let’s be about it shall we? These bodies aren’t going to bury themselves.’



# I

*Rome, September AD 184*

‘Close your mouth, Dubnus, or something will fly into it.’

The heavily built and bearded soldier walking alongside Julius, senior centurion of the First Tungrian Cohort, gave his superior officer a disparaging look before resuming his perusal of the inhabitants of the Aventine district through which they were progressing. When he spoke his voice was awestruck, as if he could barely believe the scene before him.

‘But they’re bloody everywhere, Julius! Bar girls, shop girls, girls on the street, girls on the corner, girls writing graffiti on the wall about how their clients made them scream with pleasure!’ He pointed to a prostitute leaning against the door of a house, her pitch marked out by several lewd and enticing statements as to her abilities and offerings scrawled on the wall behind her. ‘That one will even . . .’

He swallowed, and shook his head in amazement at the debauched act that was apparently on offer for the price of a decent meal.

‘Yes, the city can be rather overpowering for the first-time visitor, but then you would insist on accompanying us. Perhaps you should concentrate on the architecture instead?’

Julius turned and nodded to his tribune who was walking a few paces behind the two centurions, resplendent in a pristine toga and with his hair cut and combed to glossy perfection, even if his clean-shaven face was in defiance of the latest fashion. Dubnus drew breath to speak again, managing with some reluctance to drag his attention away from the prostitute who was so enticingly

crooking her finger at him while lasciviously teasing the digit's end with her tongue, but was rudely interrupted by Julius before he could open his mouth.

'That's a good idea, Tribune. That way he won't embarrass the rest of us by walking round with a damp spot in the front of his tunic. You're not wearing armour now Dubnus, look to your decency man!'

The big Briton gave his friend a hard look before gazing up at the buildings on either side of the road along which they were walking, craning his neck to stare up at the five- and six-storey insulae towering over them.

'You're the funny man today, are you Julius? As it happens, I was just thinking that I still can't get used to the idea that people actually live in those things. Imagine having to climb all the way up there and then discover that you've forgotten something. And what happens if there's a fire on the ground floor, and you're all the way up there?'

Tribune Scaurus laughed grimly.

'In that case, Centurion, you would at least have the gratification of knowing that you would be the last to burn, unless of course the screams of the better-off tenants in the lower floors gave you the time to ponder the choice of a slow death by fire or a quick one by impact with the ground. In the event of fire, I believe the rule of thumb is that the lowest tenant usually gets out with at least some of his possessions, the next highest occupant usually escapes with his life, and the next highest, *if* they're blessed by Fortuna's smile. After that it seems to be a simple question of either burning to death or jumping.'

The man walking beside Scaurus followed up on the tribune's comments in a more serious tone of voice. Equally formally attired and groomed, he was tall and limber in appearance, muscular in an athletic way rather than any tendency to the hulking power of the centurions walking before him. His skin, darker by contrast than that of his fellow officers, advertised the fact that he had not been born in Dubnus's native Britannia.

'Of course these days, now that they're mainly built with brick

rather than timber, the main risk isn't fire, it's collapse. People lie in bed at night in those things listening to the building creaking around them, and wondering if they'll be crushed to death if someone sneezes too loudly and brings the whole thing down. The bases aren't broad enough for the height they build them up to, you see, since no one bothers to obey the height regulations.'

Scaurus raised an eyebrow at the younger man, and his reply carried an undisguised sardonic undertone.

'Crushed under several tons of bricks? Much what anyone seeking to bother me this afternoon might feel like, I expect, given the number of escorts we managed to collect between my quarter and the transit barracks' main gate.

One of the three obviously barbarian men bringing up the rear shook his head in disgust.

'It's a good thing I heard you discussing this little afternoon stroll with Centurion Corvus, before you had the chance to sneak off into this cesspit on your own.'

Scaurus shook his head in irritation without looking back.

'Indeed, Prince Martos, what *was* I thinking? Why in Jupiter's name would we have wanted to make our way to our meeting with one of Rome's most influential senators in a discreet and, dare I say it, sober manner, when instead we could be preceded by a pair of swaggering centurions with obvious hard-ons for anything female under the age of sixty . . .' He shook his head at Julius's wounded expression. 'I saw you eying up that little blonde, First Spear, so stop pretending you're immune to the attractions of the opposite sex now that your woman has your balls firmly clamped between her thighs. Now, where was I . . . ? Ah yes, preceded by a pair of priapic officers and trailed by a trio of barbarians, at least one of whom is equally intent on impressing every working girl we pass with the glory of his manhood.'

He shook his head with amused irritation.

'If I've told you once Arminius, I must have told you a hundred times in the last ten years, they simply will not have sex with you without payment, no matter how muscular you are or, for that



matter, how much you attempt to demonstrate that you have a penis that would make a donkey feel inadequate.’ He paused for a moment, listening for any retort, before continuing. ‘As for the need to protect us, Centurion Corvus here and I both walked these streets for years without ever attracting anything worse than an unkind glance, and that was when we weren’t in the company of the five biggest and ugliest men under my command. But no matter, you have at least provided us with some measure of entertainment during our walk. And here we are – this is our destination.’

He waved a hand at a sizeable domus, a rich man’s house set in enough ground for the construction of half a dozen of the towering insulae, each side of the large detached property shielded from casual view by mature trees that had grown almost as high as the neighbouring apartment buildings.

‘Perhaps you’ll all be a little less bumptious now that we’re no longer at such imminent risk of being robbed and murdered? And remember, we’re here to provide the senator with some consolation for the death of his son, so just mind your manners or you’ll have the pleasure of a long wait on his doorstep.’

An apparently imperturbable butler greeted them with an impressive lack of any reaction in the face of so large a party of men, most of whom were clearly disreputable types to judge from their scars, tattoos and in one case the absence of an eye, even if the barbarians among them were all dressed in clean tunics and had well-polished boots. Bidding them to remain in the house’s entrance hall, he withdrew to inform his master of their arrival, leaving the party to consider the murals that adorned the room’s walls. Dubnus leaned closer, admiring the detail in a representation of a goddess frolicking in a woodland glade seen through a window painted onto the plaster.

‘Nice work.’

Julius raised an eyebrow at his friend, shaking his head in apparent bafflement.

‘Nice work? Since when, oh Prince of the Axe Men, have you had any ability to recognise the difference between good painting

and that done by a Greek pot painter using a brush poking out of his arse to slap the colours on? All you're doing is admiring her tits, you dirty bastard . . .' He leaned closer, pursing his lips in approval. 'Although on closer inspection I'm forced to agree with you that they are a most lifelike representation, what with—'

Dubnus interrupted him, pointing at the view through another 'window'.

'I know. And look at what this satyr's doing to the maiden he's captured! I swear he's got it up her—'

A voice from behind them had the two men start.

'Greetings, esteemed visitors. I sometimes have to leave my clients waiting here for hours, given the number of visitors I routinely receive, men seeking either my favour or assistance, and these murals provide them with some small measure of distraction. Given long enough, I'm told, it is possible for the diligent hunter to discover over two hundred such visions of loveliness around the room, although I must confess I've never found the time . . .'

Scaurus stepped forward with a solemn expression, bowing deeply to the toga-clad man who stood in the doorway that linked the hall to the rest of the house.

'Greetings, Senator Sigilis. Please accept our humble gratitude for your kindness in agreeing to meet with us.'

Their host returned the bow, albeit in the more cursory manner due to a member of the equestrian class from a senator, the taut smile of greeting on his face the expression of a man who had not shown genuine pleasure for a long time. He was as tall as either of the Tungrian centurions, although his body was whip thin by comparison to their muscular bulk, and his hair was silver-grey over a lean and heavily lined face.

'The gratitude is mine, Tribune, for your kindness in expressing the desire to speak with me of my son's last few weeks of life. I would imagine that most soldiers would prefer to forget the men they have left on the battlefield, much less actually come face-to-face with a grieving parent. Please come this way, and do bring your, ah . . . *familia* . . . with you.'

They followed the senator through the archway into a large garden in which a pair of slaves were tending the already immaculately manicured plants and flowers.

‘Over here.’

He led them to a seating area at the garden’s far end, stone benches arrayed around a flat gravelled area large enough to act as a small stage, or for a group of musicians to play their instruments, and protected from the sun’s heat by a circle of carefully planted cedar trees. At the butler’s command, the gardeners went into the domus and carried out a padded chair, into which the senator lowered himself with a grimace, then vanished back into the house leaving only the butler, who, satisfied that his master was comfortable, retired out of earshot.

‘Forgive my ostentation. A decade ago good honest marble would have sufficed for my backside, but these days I find the stiffness in my joints eased a little by a touch of luxury. I thought we might best speak out here in the garden, given that walls frequently hear more than would appear possible, even, I suspect, in my house.’ Sigilis played his bleak stare over each of them, his eyes assessing every man in turn before moving on. ‘You bring a large party with you, Tribune, larger than I expected, and yet you provide me with some small distraction by doing so. If I might speculate as to the origins of your people . . . ?’

Scaurus smiled back at him.

‘By all means, Senator. We must present something of a mixed bag.’

‘Indeed you do, although some of you are easier to read than others.’ He looked at the tribune. ‘You, of course, are already known to me, Rutilius Scaurus. I remember your father well, and the disappointment we all felt when he was obliged to take his own life after being landed with the blame for that shabby little affair on the other side of the Rhenus. I am, of course, on excellent terms with your sponsor . . .’ He smiled thinly. ‘I find it ironic that his fortunes should be recovering so strongly with the praetorian prefect’s death, while my own seem to be in a terminal decline, but I can’t hold it against the man. He tells me that you’ve

grown no less headstrong for your years of service. He also tells me that you've been dabbling in politics of late?'

Scaurus shook his head.

'Not me, Senator, I'll leave that to men with more ability and stronger stomachs than mine.'

Sigilis raised an eyebrow.

'So it wasn't you that marched ten boxes of gold into the palace and got the praetorian prefect murdered by the emperor a few nights ago?'

The younger man shrugged, his face commendably impassive.

'I was no more than a small part of that night's events, Senator. Most of the hard work was done by your colleague Clodius Albinus, in league with the emperor's freedman Cleander.'

Sigilis chuckled mirthlessly.

'How very self-effacing of you. You carried a cargo of gold, proving the praetorian prefect's ambitions to take the throne all the way from the northern frontier . . . Where was it again?'

'Britannia, Senator.'

'Yes, all the way from Britannia, along, I'm reliably informed, with the lost eagle of the Sixth Legion, which you then used to tip Commodus over the edge to murder his own praetorian guard commander. Somewhat to the amazement of the hapless Clodius Albinus, I would imagine, and much to the delight of that conniving snake Cleander.'

Scaurus returned his level gaze in silence, until the senator nodded slowly.

'Just as your sponsor intimated to me. You're shot through with granite, aren't you Tribune, and a dangerous man to cross for all of your modesty and self-effacement?'

He turned his stare to the younger man sitting next to Scaurus.

'And what have we here? Early twenties, Roman in appearance, and muscled like a man used to carrying the weight of weapons and armour on a routine basis. I did my time in the service, and, believe it or not, I once had much the same build. You're fresh from battle too, if appearances are any indication, unless of course

you did that shaving . . . ? He raised a hand to point at the scar across the bridge of Marcus's nose. 'It looks too light to have been a sword. A spear, perhaps?'

Marcus tipped his head in recognition.

'Yes, Senator. I didn't get my head out the way fast enough.'

Sigilis pursed his lips.

'You were still lucky, that's a scratch compared with some of the facial wounds I saw serving as a tribune with the Thirtieth Legion in Caesarea. Well, scar or no scar, you remind me in your manner of a man I used to know, a highly respected fellow senator who was clearly too well thought of to survive under this regime. He died a good three years ago, and his entire family with him, dragged from their beds at night and carried away to a fate the thought of which makes me shudder. Only the older son remained unaccounted for, or so the informed gossip from the palace had it. He had been serving with the praetorian guard as a centurion, but vanished only days before his father was arrested and was last seen heading for Ostia with orders to take ship on a courier mission – or at least that was the story that got him out of the praetorian fortress.'

He locked gazes with the centurion.

'Your name, young man?'

The Roman rose from his seat and bowed.

'I am known as Marcus Tribulus Corvus, Senator, Centurion, First Tungrian Cohort, but I am indeed the fugitive son of your friend Appius Valerius Aquila. You now hold my life, and that of my family, in your hands.'

Sigilis smiled back at him with apparent genuine pleasure.

'Rest assured that your secret is safe with me. It is indeed an honour to make your acquaintance, Marcus Valerius Aquila. The letters my son wrote before he died in Dacia made generous mention of you, although he was clever enough to do so in veiled terms that he knew only I would understand. And now you have returned to Rome with the fire of revenge bright in your eyes, even though you have no idea where to find the men upon whom you would visit your violence?'

The young Roman's tone hardened, no longer deferring to the status of the man to whom his words were directed.

'I will find them, Senator, with or without the help your son told me you would be able to offer. And *when* I find them, I fully intend to subject them to the same indignities my father, my mother, my brother and my sisters suffered before they died.'

Sigilis sat back and stared at him with grim amusement.

'That's more like the way I'd expect a man of your class to express himself, under the circumstances. So, a tribune with a propensity for righting old wrongs, and a centurion set on vengeance for his dead family. That would be a combination to strike fear into the men responsible for the destruction of your family, I'd say, *if* they were to find out that they were being hunted. And what sort of supporting cast do we have for this pair of furies?'

He looked across the remaining members of the party with an expression turned bleak again, locking gazes with each man briefly before speaking.

'Two more soldiers, officers to judge from their apparent confidence, both scarred and both with the look of killers.' He smiled grimly at Julius and Dubnus. 'Some men find themselves unable to kill, even when their lives are at risk in battle, and others kill but are for the most part unchanged by the experience, apart from the inevitable nightmares and regrets that will trouble them until they come to terms with the fact. And there is a third type of man, gentlemen, men whose eyes lose just a hint of what they were before once they have stood toe to toe with other men and taken their lives, while also gaining something else that's impossible to define. I saw battle more than once with the Thirtieth, and I saw sleepy farm boys become executioners in the space of one swift engagement, once they'd undergone their blood initiation. Their eyes were just as yours are now, windows on souls with some small part torn away and replaced with something else, no more evil than they were before, just with a fraction of their humanity excised. They scared me more than the enemy we were fighting, if I'm honest with you . . .' He smiled bleakly. 'Which was the point at which I realised I probably wasn't fitted to military service.'

The senator laughed grimly, shaking his head and turning his attention to the remainder of the party.

‘And a trio of barbarians, each of you bigger and uglier than the last. Now that isn’t something a man sees every day, not without chains and collars at any rate. You, with your hair worn in a topknot, you are a German I presume?’

The slave nodded.

‘I am Arminus, Senator. I was taken prisoner by the tribune in battle, and he saw fit to spare my life and bind me to his service. Now I guard his back when he is foolish enough to leave it uncovered . . . which is often.’

Sigilis snorted a laugh.

‘A slave with a sharp tongue in his head, and yet unmarked by any sign of the lash. Either your master is a gentler man than I’d imagined, or your service to him has value that outweighs such minor irritations. And beside you, a one-eyed man with more scars than I’ve ever seen on a warrior, looking back at me as if I am the subordinate in our brief relationship. Royalty?’

His question was directed at Scaurus, but Martos answered the question directly, gesturing to the tribune.

‘I was a prince, before I was betrayed to this man by a mutual enemy who took my throne and abused my people. The tribune spared me from the execution that was my fate by rights, and now I am an ally of Rome.’

‘And the eye?’

‘I ran amok among my enemies when we recaptured my tribe’s capital, and I lost my reason to an unthinking rage for their blood. When I regained the ability to think clearly I was painted from toe to hair with the blood of a score of dead and mutilated men. My eye was the price that my god exacted for that revenge, it seems . . .’ He paused for a moment, shaking his head sadly. ‘I would have traded every life I took to have found my son alive, but my betrayers had already thrown him from the highest rock to feed the crows, and caused my woman to take my daughter’s life to spare her the indignity of their abuse. She killed herself . . .’

‘And you felt unable to remain in the place where your family was destroyed as a consequence of your having trusted this betrayer?’

Martos nodded.

‘I have entrusted my future to these men.’

The senator nodded, turning his attention to the last of them, taller than either of the other two barbarians by a head and whose body was almost a parody of the human frame, such was its size and musculature.

‘And you, the giant. Who are you?’

The big man’s voice rumbled a one-word reply.

‘Lugos.’

He pondered Scaurus’s turned head and raised eyebrow for a moment before speaking again.

‘My pardon. Lugos, *Lord*.’

Sigilis chuckled, the flesh around his eyes crinkling with the pleasure.

‘There’s no need to call me “Lord”, barbarian, I do not expect you to obey the formalities of our society since you are so clearly a newcomer to our city, although a simple “Senator” would suffice if you feel such a need.’

Sigilis returned his attention to Scaurus.

‘And now, with our introductions made, perhaps you will indulge the wishes of a grieving father and tell me how it was that my son came to die in Dacia? I received the official communication, of course, and my senatorial colleague Clodius Albinus was able to fill in a few of the gaps given that he was in command of the Thirteenth Legion in Dacia, but you are the first men I’ve met who were actually present when he died. Tell me all about that day, if you will, and provide me with some feel for the way in which my Lucius went to meet our ancestors?’

The second of the audience chamber’s two doors opened, on the other side of the wide airy room from which its four occupants had entered. They had been ushered one at a time into lamp-lit opulence by the stony-faced praetorians who had escorted them through the palace, then left to their own devices with the politely



delivered, but nonetheless firm instruction to wait for their host. A single man dressed in a formal toga stepped inside, glancing around the table at which they were sitting waiting for him. All four stirred in their seats at his entrance, even the gladiator who prided himself on his self-proclaimed imperturbability shifted his position minutely, and the newcomer smiled at their reaction, opening his hands in greeting.

‘Gentlemen, my apologies for keeping you waiting. Affairs of state, you know how these things are . . .’

The squat, ugly man sitting at the table’s far end cracked a slow, lazy smile.

‘We know, Cleander. There’s not one of us that hasn’t kept a man waiting for one reason or another, to make him nervous or to piss him off.’ He gestured to the man beside him. ‘Even our gladiator here has been known to toy with a man for a while before taking him down with a single sword blow. The old tricks are the best, eh?’

The imperial chamberlain smiled back at him.

‘Indeed, although I’m not exactly here to have one of your fingers cut off for refusing to pay your protection money, am I Brutus?’

The other man shrugged, but before he could answer another of them spoke, his voice crisp with authority, clearly used to issuing commands and having them obeyed without question. He had removed his armour when he received the summons to attend the gathering of the Knives, but his red praetorian tunic and the vine stick lying on the table before him told their own story as to his role in the palace.

‘He’s right though, isn’t he, Chamberlain? My tribune, the praetorian prefect above him, you, you’re all in the game of imposing your will on other men. We used to work for the praetorian prefect, but now that the Emperor’s stuck the blunt end of a spear through him and left him to bleed to death in the dark, we work for *you*. That’s the point you’re making, I assume?’

Cleander dipped his head in a sardonic acceptance of the truth in the centurion’s statement.

'You assume correctly, Fabius Dorso, since I will certainly be the man keeping your new prefect waiting from now on, when I feel the need to impress him with my authority, since I shall be his master in all but name.'

The praetorian dipped his head in return and kept his mouth shut, wisely deciding to let his fellow conspirators mount any further challenge to the chamberlain's apparently unquenchable ambition. Unsurprisingly, it was the man sitting opposite him, resplendent in a spotless toga of the very finest quality wool, who took up the unspoken challenge. His voice was acidly sardonic, a weapon perfected over years of debate.

'However will you find the time to manage the detail of such a large and important role, Aurelius Cleander?'

'Ah, well you know how it is as well as I do, don't you, Senator?' The chamberlain smiled back at him with a shrug. 'Some men, Asinius Pilinius, have a talent of making a life's work out of something that needs nothing more than a swift decision and the right delegation. There's always someone with the right skills and motivation to carry out your orders, if you look hard enough for him, and I seem to have the skill of finding that man and putting him to work. I'll answer the big questions and leave the people that I select to enact them to work out how best to achieve my desires. A bit like the way we'll be working from now on, in fact. I'll decide which men are deemed to have committed treason, and you four can deal with them in the usual fashion, take your share of the spoils, have your fun and make sure that the throne receives the condemned man's assets. Speaking of which . . .'

He unrolled a scroll, stretching out the silence as he read down the items listed. At length he looked up again, gazing around the table at each man in turn, his stare level and direct.

'Gentlemen, I think it's important that we have a clear understanding at the start of this new relationship. It seems to me that you may have become used to taking a little more than your agreed share under Prefect Perennis, to judge from this inventory of the proceeds of his estate.' He raised the scroll. 'There's nothing *really* valuable missing of course, all of the major assets are

accounted for, but there seems to be a disappointing amount of portable wealth that has, for want of a better term, gone for a walk.' He looked up at the four men around the table, pursing his lips in amusement at his own joke, although not one of them had showed any sign of reaction. He shrugged. 'Here's an example. There seems to be a suspiciously small number of slaves available to sell, and none of them, it appears, the prefect's family members. Which is disappointing since, as we all know, the children of the rich and famous command such high prices from the men who appreciate that sort of thing.'

The praetorian's eyes flicked momentarily to look at the senator, and Cleander smiled inwardly at the realisation of one of his suspicions.

'Yes, there are a great many valuable items that we expected to recover which seem to have gone missing, which has piqued the emperor more than a little. A rather splendid collection of antique swords which apparently dated back to the time of Alexander, for one thing. He had his eye on those, as you can imagine. There were some rather splendid marbles that seem to have vanished too, rather pornographic in nature and, while not all that valuable they were, it seems, on the list of things that the emperor expected to receive as his compensation for the former prefect's treason. Their absence has left him somewhat piqued, and a piqued Commodus is not a safe man for any of us, you can be assured of that. So, given that the safe delivery of the Perennis estate to the throne was your collective responsibility, I think the fairest solution to this problem is for you all to waive your fees and percentages for the job on this occasion, as a means of reassuring the emperor that you remain his loyal and attentive servants and that you intend to protect *his* property somewhat better next time. I'm sure that you can see the sense in that, or would anyone like to argue the point? You would like there to be a next time, I presume?'

The gladiator Mortiferum stirred indolently in his chair and brushed a crease from his perfectly tailored tunic before speaking, casting a sidelong glance at Pilinius, and the chamberlain shuddered at the lack of life in the younger man's eyes.

‘You want me to accept the loss of my share because our senatorial colleague here and his cronies like to play their games with the wives and children of our victims?’

He hooked a thumb at the subject of his words, who stared down at the table’s highly polished surface without any sign of emotion. Cleander shrugged, affecting disinterest in the swordsman’s statement.

‘No, I expect *you* to accept the loss of *your* share because *you* failed to ensure that *your* side of the bargain was honoured.’

The gladiator’s head turned slowly until his eyes were boring into the chamberlain’s, and while Cleander knew that the deliberate movement was all part of a well-practised persona, he was unable to suppress a shiver of fear at the malevolence that radiated from the man’s expression.

‘You know that I could be over this table and breaking your neck before you could summon your guards?’

Forcing a smile onto his face, Cleander shook his head.

‘I think not. I gave very explicit instructions before entering this room with exactly such an act of foolishness in mind. If any of you offer me violence, then you will *all* be physically restrained, at whatever the cost in guardsmen since they are a commodity of which I am blessed with a fairly inexhaustible supply. Not killed, gentlemen, but rather deliberately kept alive and imprisoned, after which all of your families will be gathered here to watch you being crucified in a private arena. And then, while each of you twists and writhes on his cross, your loved ones will be violated in the most appalling ways you can imagine in front of you, before being ripped to pieces by savage animals which will literally eat them alive. Not the usual lions and tigers though, I have something far more entertaining in mind for that eventuality.’

He paused, enjoying the silence that had fallen across the room.

‘The dog, while far less effective as an instrument of execution than a lion, is a far more terrifying prospect when employed in numbers. All one needs to do for a really good show is to paint the most sensitive parts of the victim’s anatomy with a nice thick paste of blood and set half a dozen ravenously hungry animals

loose upon them. Need I describe the unendurable agony that your family members will undergo while their helpless writhing bodies are being torn apart under such loathsome circumstances? I would have thought that you in particular might enjoy the irony involved in that image, Senator Pilinius.'

The praetorian, the senator and the gang leader were all in his pocket, that much was evident from their stunned expressions, although the gladiator merely sat back, his malevolent stare steady on the chamberlain. Cleander grinned back at him.

'And there it is, eh Death Bringer? To have control of brutal men it is simply necessary to promise the application of even greater brutality to those they cherish. And nobody does brutality quite like the Roman state, which makes the whole thing rather simple. But that's not enough for you, is it? You have no family other than your brother, do you, nobody for me to threaten with the most degrading of deaths? You think you're immune from this leverage. So for you, great champion of the arena, I have a different fate planned. You and your brother will both be crucified, but you'll be cut down from your crosses before you choke yourselves to death, to ensure that you'll be *compos mentis* for what will follow. You will be cut to pieces very, very slowly, one thin slice every hour over a period of months. Imagine, first your fingers, one coin-thin piece at a time, then your toes, and then, one cut after another, your limbs, with each wound promptly cauterised to prevent you bleeding to death. I'd imagine that it might take the best part of a year for you to die, and all the while you'll be cursing yourself for succumbing to a moment of anger. When you're not screaming in agony and then babbling out your insanity, that is.'

He raised an eyebrow and waited, keeping his face utterly immobile as the gladiator stared back for a moment before nodding slowly.

'Good. I'm glad we understand each other. Be clear, gentlemen, that should any mysterious fate befall me, no matter how innocent you may all seem in the matter, the punishments that I've described will be delivered with swift and brutal efficiency. Call it my last wishes.'

He stood, rolling the scroll up.

‘And let’s have no recriminations, eh? The missing items are more than enough to cover your respective shares, so sort it out between you and prepare yourselves for the next time the emperor calls upon your services. After all, I think I can state with some assurance that you don’t really do the things you do for the money, do you?’

‘So, Centurion, my son died an honourable death?’

Sigilis had waited until the story of the battle on the ice had been fully recounted before swiftly turning to Marcus, knowing that Scaurus would be more inclined to protect him from any unpalatable facts. Well aware that he would be likely to face the question at some point, Marcus had long since rehearsed the answer that would disguise the fact that the senator’s son had died with a spear in his back.

‘He died in combat with overwhelming numbers of the enemy, Senator, beset on all sides. Your ancestors will have been proud to receive him into their company.’

Sigilis stared hard at him, and the young Roman fished inside his toga, pulling out a heavy gold pendant which he held out to the older man.

‘When I was able to recover his body, this was still around his neck. I expect he would have wanted it to be returned to you.’

The senator looked down at the yellow disc lying on his palm, the finely detailed representation of the god Mars standing on a field of vanquished foes. He swallowed, shaking his head slowly.

‘That pendant has been in my family for generations, all the way back to the conquest of the Dacians, when Trajan decided to bring that accursed land into the empire. My grandfather had it made with gold he took from a nobleman he killed on the battlefield, and passed it on to my father when he served. I wore it in Caesarea, and Lucius took it in his turn when he joined his legion. He was my only surviving son, after the plague from the east took both of his brothers from me, so there are no members of my family left to bring it further honour. Wear it

for me, and every time you remember my son you will perpetuate his memory.'

Marcus nodded, folding his fingers around the heavy metal disc.

'Your son wrote something on the ice before he died, using his own blood. Something he wanted me to remember . . .'

Sigilis raised an incredulous eyebrow.

'With his *blood*?'

Marcus nodded soberly.

'As I said, Senator, he was a strong-willed man. He was dying, he knew that much, but he was determined that I should act upon something he had told me a few days before. It was—'

The senator's voice was suddenly cold.

'Did this by any chance involve a group of imperial assassins who call themselves "The Emperor's Knives"?'

'Yes sir.'

Sigilis pursed his lips.

'I didn't intend for him to overhear my discussions on the subject of the revival of that most despicable of imperial habits: the murder of wealthy men under the pretext of their having betrayed Rome, followed by the confiscation of their assets.' His lip curled. 'Confiscatory *justice*. I feared – and I still fear – that my estates would eventually attract the attention of the men behind the throne, and I wanted to spare him from having to live under the shadow of that threat. But, with all the persuasive power of an only son, he somehow managed to convince me that he should hear what it was that my informant had to say—'

Scaurus interrupted.

'Your *informant*? I believed that you had employed an investigator?'

The senator shook his head slowly.

'You've evidently been away from Rome too long, Tribune, and paid too little attention to your history lessons as a younger man, I suspect. There is a ruinous state of affairs that is forever waiting its time to flourish under the absolute power of imperial rule. It happened under the emperor Tiberius, when Sejanus came to

dominate the city, it happened twice more, under Nero and Domitian, and now we see the same bloody horror rear its head once more under this dissolute fool Commodus. It is rule by the informant, gentlemen, a rule that terrorises the worthy man of good character who commits no other crime than to be wealthy, when the empire is as near to bankruptcy as it can be without actually collapsing. We invaded Dacia back in Trajan's day, and the failed attempts before that, simply because it had enough gold to sustain the empire for a century or more, enough to allow five emperors to rule equitably because they had the riches of the Dacian mines to support their rule, and therefore had no need to indulge in underhanded methods to support their budgets.'

He sighed, shaking his head.

'And now? Now the empire has fallen prey to the eastern plague, and the population is reduced in size so drastically that tax revenues are falling too fast for the mines' output to compensate. Add to that an emperor who spends gold on his own pleasure like water, and the recipe was almost complete. All that was needed then was for someone in a position of high power to realise that the only thing standing between the emperor and anything he wanted were the limits of that man's conscience.'

His gaze flicked up to Marcus, an apologetic grimace playing across his face.

'Your father was a man of such impeccable character as to have earned his passage to Elysium several times over, and yet he was one of the first victims of that unrestrained absolute power, as Perennis started down the path of blood that has led us to where we are now. His wealth was well known, and besides that Commodus openly coveted his villa on the Appian Way. After all, it had its own baths, water supply by aqueduct, even a hippodrome. What more could any emperor want from a country residence!'

His laugh was bitter.

'And now we members of the senatorial class live in fear that we will be the next to face false accusations, to find ourselves blinking in the torchlight in the middle of the night when Commodus's hired killers come for us and our families. Yes . . .'



He nodded at the look on Marcus's face. 'The *Knives*. So you pull a face when I say the word "informer", Tribune, and yet that is what Rome has become once more, a city in the merciless grip of the informers. There are more than enough men of this craven nature within the Senate itself for me to be utterly confident in predicting that this emperor has sowed the seeds of his own downfall, creating a monster that must eventually eat itself. And so I have suborned one such man, a well-placed individual who spends most of his time listening for the tiny whispers of dissent that can be used to accuse an innocent citizen of treason for a crime no greater than discussing the days of the republic, before that misguided genius Octavian declared himself Caesar Augustus because he saw no other way to liberate Rome from its apparently endless cycle of civil wars than by concentrating absolute power in the hands of a single man. I pay my informant well, and in return he ensures that I know exactly where the Knives will make their next visit.'

He signalled to the butler, who in turn made his way back to the house and opened a door behind which a hooded figure had been waiting. As the informer made his way across the garden, Sigilis turned back to the Tungrians with an apologetic grimace.

'I didn't want to introduce you to him until we had the rest of our business out of the way. He tells me that you parted on less than ideal terms when you last met.'

Marcus's eyes narrowed in suspicion as the informer stopped before them, his face almost invisible in the shadow beneath the hood.

'*You?*'

Arminius started as he realised who the senator's man was, surging off the bench with a snarl only to find himself face-to-face with Scaurus.

'You are a guest in this man's house, Arminius, and still my slave to command! You *will* respect his hospitality!'

The hooded man laughed softly.

'How very decent of you, Tribune Scaurus. It seems that the senator's trust in your sense of Roman manners was justified . . .'

The voice was unmistakable in its lazy drawl, and Marcus was shocked to find his thoughts snapped back to a woodland clearing two years before, in the wake of a victory over the fearsome Venicone tribe. He looked at the informer in disbelief as the man reached up and pulled back the hood to reveal a face that Marcus had never expected to see again.

‘Well now, centurion, are you Tribulus Corvus or Valerius Aquila today?’

The young centurion spat out the man’s name through bared teeth, seething at the sight of the man.

*‘Excingus!’*

‘Let’s make one thing clear, shall we?’

The gladiator put a finger firmly on Brutus’s chest, prodding him hard enough to put a scowl on the other man’s face.

‘Keep your bloody hands off me! You want to be a bit more careful who you—’

‘No, I really *don’t*.’ Mortiferum leaned in closer, his voice pitched low so that his words were only barely audible, and the praetorian took the senator by the arm and drew him away until they were well out of earshot. ‘Don’t imagine that just because your thugs have scared a few shopkeepers and pimps into submission I wouldn’t go through you and your muscle like a hot poker though a week-old corpse.’ He prodded the gang leader’s chest again, the smaller man’s body jerking with the force of his gesture. ‘Try me, and find out just how many of your men are willing to stand against me and my followers. The people of this city worship me and my brother, and I reckon that they’d tear a man to pieces just for raising a blade against us outside of the arena. I might be wrong, of course, but that’s a calculation for you to make. You two, come here!’

The guard centurion strolled up with the senator following slowly behind him, and the gladiator looked about him at the three of them.

‘I’ve been denied my fee from the other night because you three couldn’t keep your sticky fingers to yourselves. Dorso!’

He pointed at the praetorian, who returned his stare levelly.

‘You’re probably the least of it, but even you had your share. You and those two guardsmen who follow you round, you carried away enough of Perennis’s antiques to more than cover your fee, if you were to sell them on.’

The soldier nodded.

‘That’s true enough.’

The accusing finger turned to point at the senator, who pouted back at him with an expression of haughty disinterest.

‘And you, Pilinius. I counted thirty or more slaves being led away by your men, not to mention the prefect’s wife and children. I don’t care what perverted games you get up to with them, but that many bodies represent a lot of gold. More than your share, in fact.’

The patrician shrugged.

‘I think you’ll find that possession is the guiding principle here, my friend.’

The gladiator grinned savagely, reaching out and taking a handful of the other man’s toga to pull him close.

‘And I think you’ll find that the guiding principle is in fact a foot of sharp iron, if you’re not careful, Senator. Think on it.’

He pushed the suddenly white-faced Pilinius away from him with a grimace of disgust, spinning back to push his finger into Brutus’s face.

‘But you, *fool*, are the stupidest bastard of the three of you. Only you could have taken the simple task we’ve been given and turned it into an act of wholesale robbery!’

‘What—’

The gladiator poked him again, harder, looking round the three of them with a snarl of anger.

‘Do you think I’m truly stupid, just because I choose to live in a ludus cell, rather than buying out my contract and splashing my money on a big house and a dozen slaves? I’m the smartest of all of us, you pricks, because I keep my head down and don’t attract attention to myself, something you might do well to consider. You . . .’ He poked the guardsman. ‘With your antiques

collection hidden in that private museum no one's supposed to know about. You . . .' He turned to the senator. 'Slaughtering the families of the nobility for the fun of your gang of upper-class perverts! And you!' He snapped down on the gang leader, his expression so fierce that the other man was unable to avoid recoiling. 'You, you stupid bastard, slinking back once we'd all left and bribing the guards who'd been set to keep the Perennis house intact to look the other way. Since when were you interested in *art*?'

He looked around him in disgust.

'Which is why, gentlemen, you're all going to dig in your purses and come up with my share, or you'll all live to regret it. Work it out any way you like between you, but make sure that gold's in my hands before sunset tomorrow or there'll be excitement. And trust me, you'd much rather life remained dull.'

He turned and stalked away, leaving the other three staring at each other with a combination of calculation and bemusement.

The informer smiled and bowed, opening his hands in welcome.

'Tiberius Varius Excingus, to remind you of my full name, former centurion in that exalted corps of spies, blackmailers and murderers that masquerade under the title of "Grain Officers" – and now, given my rather abrupt and vigorously enforced resignation from my former employment as a result of failing to bring you to justice, Centurion, present-day informer. Funny how things turn out, isn't it?'

Scaurus stared at him for a moment before turning to their host with a look of polite disbelief.

'I'm not sure you understand quite how dangerous this man is, Senator. The last time we crossed paths with him, he was in the company of a praetorian centurion, a remorseless murderer, and they were tracking down my centurion here on orders from Prefect Perennis. They abducted his wife with the intention of using her both as bait to ensure his compliance and distraction to make his murder easier. This man Excingus threatened my family here in Rome, and if he had not made his escape in the

confusion of the resulting fight, one of us would undoubtedly have put a sword in his guts and left him to choke out his last breath in a puddle of his own blood.'

The former frumentari shrugged, nodding equably as Sigilis replied.

'That's more or less as he's already related to me, as it happens.' The senator fixed Scaurus with a penetrating stare. 'I won't make any excuses for his previous behaviour, Tribune, but neither will I apologise for using him to my own ends. Varius Excingus is without any shred of doubt quite the most amoral man I've ever met, but that complete lack of any decency provides me with information that has already saved lives.'

Marcus shook his head in incredulous disbelief.

'And you *trust* him?'

The senator laughed, and pointed a finger at Excingus.

'Trust? *Him*? Do you take me for a madman?'

The informer shrugged again and pursed his lips, nodding sagely.

'I'll answer that one, if you'll allow me the liberty, Senator?'

Sigilis gestured for him to continue, and Excingus smiled at Marcus as broadly as if their previous encounter had ended in vows to meet again someday, rather than with a bloodbath of the men sent to find the younger man and kill him, with the grain officer only managing to escape with his life by the narrowest of margins.

'No, Centurion, the senator would indeed be most unwise to repose any trust in a man with my singular lack of principles. But I'll remind you of a discussion we had the last time we met, when you asked me how it was that I could live with the things I do. You may not recall my answer, since I'd imagine that you had bigger matters on your mind, but I know what my response was because it's the same one I give every time I'm asked the question. My only guiding principle, Valerius Aquila, is to make the best of this life in any way that I can. And if that eventually means that my informal provision of information to Senator Sigilis comes to an end, then so be it. For now, however, the senator's generous

rates of payment are more than sufficient to ensure my complete discretion.'

Scaurus shook his head.

'I wouldn't trust you any further than I could see you, and even then I'd be keeping my sword to hand. But if the senator has chosen to employ your services I'll go this far and no further: while you're under his protection I will not seek to harm you in any way . . .' He turned and played a hard stare across the men behind him. 'And neither will any of my men. However . . .' He stepped closer to the informer, until their noses were almost touching. 'If I so much as suspect that you're planning to sell us out, then I'll personally see to it that you vanish without trace.' He turned away to retake his seat with a disbelieving shake of his head. 'I doubt you'd be missed.'

Excingus nodded equably.

'Exactly as I would have expected. And perhaps I can lighten the moment a little?' He fished in a pouch attached to his belt and held out an iron key to Marcus. 'Here.'

The young centurion stared at it for a moment without making any move to accept the offering.

'A key? To what?'

The informer smiled back at him, reaching for his hand and pressing the key into the palm.

'Ask your wife. And now gentlemen, if you've come in search of information, perhaps we can get past the initial awkwardness and get down to business. Senator?'

He held out a hand, and the older man nodded, signalling to his butler once more. The slave reached down into a wooden box that had been concealed in the shrubbery, taking out what appeared to be a purse. Crossing the garden with the same impassivity he had displayed before, he placed it in his master's hand with a bow. Sigilis acknowledged him with a grave inclination of his head.

'Thank you. I expect you have pressing duties to attend to in the house? Please don't allow this inconsequential matter to impede you in their completion.'

The butler bowed again, and to Marcus's eye it seemed that a look of relief crossed his face as he turned to make his way back through the garden and into the domus. Excingus held out a hand.

'Poor man. He's more than intelligent enough to understand the heat of the fire you're playing with by employing my rather dubious services, isn't he?'

The senator dropped the purse onto his level palm with a resigned expression.

'I suspect he looks askance at having to pay you to provide information to these men for which you've already received a substantial sum.'

Julius frowned at the informer, still far from happy with such an unexpected turn of events.

'You make him pay simply to talk to us?'

'I do. And so would you, in my place. Every additional person I share my knowledge with presents an additional risk of my being betrayed . . .'

The first spear barked out a laugh.

'And wouldn't that be ironic!'

Excingus simply continued speaking, ignoring the barb.

' . . . tortured for as long as I could stand the pain without descending into insanity, no matter what truth and lies I babbled in extremis, then summarily executed and dropped into a deep pit to rot, unmourned and most certainly unlamented.'

Sigilis coughed as if clearing his throat.

'And so, having been paid . . . ?'

The informer nodded.

'Apologies, Senator, I was on the verge of becoming maudlin. As you say, to business.' He turned to address the Tungrians. 'I suggest that you abandon your prejudices, gentlemen, and pay especially close attention to what I am about to tell you, for I doubt that anyone else in Rome has either sufficient knowledge or courage to provide you with this information. There are four men who form the heart of the emperor's policy of propping his treasury up through "confiscatory justice" . . .'

He paused, waiting for any of them to comment, but none of the men sitting around him responded.

‘These four men bring a particular combination of skills and experience to the services they perform, not to mention their shared disregard for the humanity of their victims. They are, in different ways, intelligent, driven and successful men in their own fields, positively charming in one case, and none of them displays any overt signs of mania, and yet they are all, in their own ways, just about the most dangerous men in the entire city. Perennis gathered them to him when it became clear that the throne would not survive without financial assistance, reasoning that his own praetorian guard might be likely to draw the line at being ordered to slaughter a man and then either kill or enslave his entire familia. He gave them whatever it was that he believed would motivate them, but we can simplify that down to two things. Firstly he offered them money. A lot of money, for a relatively small amount of effort. And secondly, he extended to them the opportunity to do exactly as they pleased with some of the most respected families in Rome. Think about that for a moment, and then ask yourself how many men in the city would jump at the chance to have free licence with the women of a household like this one. Never mind the novelty of taking the mistress of the house by force while her husband’s corpse is still cooling on floor, think of the possibilities for a man with that inclination. Daughters, female slaves . . . more than enough helpless female flesh for everyone, eh?’

He met Marcus’s stare of hatred with an equally frank gaze.

‘I won’t ask for your forgiveness for pointing out the obvious, Centurion, since I know that your own family was one of the first to suffer such a catastrophic end, but I *will* point out that I’m simply explaining these men’s motivation. Hate me for doing so if you like, but at least recognise the realities of what you’re dealing with. You might find that understanding of some value, once you’ve mastered your repugnance at the knowledge.’

He shrugged in the face of the young centurion’s obdurate stare.

‘Anyway, as I was saying, there are four of them. So, where shall we start?’ He mused for a moment. ‘Perhaps with the most



dangerous of them, a gladiator who fights under the name of Mortiferum . . .’

The Tungrian party left the senator’s house in the late afternoon, Excingus having departed via a well-disguised and heavily built door in the garden wall that opened into the storeroom of a shop on the other side of the wall. Senator Sigilis had stared at the departing informer’s back with the expression of a man who urgently needed to wash his hands.

‘I rent the shopkeeper his premises for next to nothing, on the condition that the occasional person comes and goes in a rather more discreet manner than knocking at my front door. Of course, using it to admit a man like that means that I can’t rely on it for a discreet exit myself, should the need arise, but then it’s not the only secret way out of the property, as I’m sure you can imagine.’

The Tungrians had taken their leave of him with much to consider, and even Dubnus was uncharacteristically quiet as they made their way back towards the Ostian Gate. Less than a hundred paces from the gate’s massive archway, a pair of men stepped out onto the cobbles before them, one of them instantly recognisable as Senator Albinus, Scaurus’s former commander in Dacia and, since the confrontation in the emperor’s throne room that had ended in the praetorian prefect’s death, his sworn enemy. The other was Cotta, a muscular man with a weather-beaten face and the leader of Albinus’s personal bodyguard. A former legion centurion, he had established a small but effective team of bodyguards composed of the pick of the soldiers retiring from his legion and had been bankrolled by Albinus, to whom he therefore owed a considerable debt in both money and gratitude. The tribune stepped forward to meet them, holding up a hand to halt his men.

‘Senator Albinus. Centurion. To what do we owe this unexpected pleasure?’

The big man stared back at him in silence for a moment before waving a hand and calling out a command that rang out down the suddenly empty street.

‘Bring them.’

As he strode off down a side street, ten or so men emerged from the shops to either side and behind the Tungrians, another half-dozen strolling out into the street behind Cotta and blocking the road to the gate. Each of them was carrying a tight roll of cloth, and Julius raised a hand waist-high, waving it downwards in a clear signal to his men to refrain from reaching for their knives. Cotta smiled easily at Scaurus, gesturing to the side street.

'Best if you come with us, Tribune. The senator wants a word with you, and it's probably best not to have the plebs gawping at us while he's doing it, eh?'

He shot Marcus a knowing glance and then raised a questioning eyebrow at Scaurus, who looked appraisingly at the men encircling his command.

'Your men *are* armed, I presume, Centurion Cotta?'

The retired soldier snapped out a terse order.

'*Swords!*'

Each of his men pushed a hand into their roll of cloth, pulling a short infantry gladius from the fabric. Scaurus shrugged, his glance at Marcus eloquent, then turned to follow Albinus up the street. Thirty paces brought them out into the shade of a small square surrounded on all sides by insulae, and the burly senator waited silently in its middle until his hired swordsmen had herded the Tungrians into the enclosed space, grinning as Julius and Dubnus looked about them with expressions promising swift violence, clearly restrained only by the weapons that hemmed them in on all sides.

'Perfect, isn't it? I own the buildings around us, of course, which is why there aren't idlers dangling out of every window!'

Scaurus looked about him with thinly disguised amusement.

'Always one for the theatrical, aren't you Senator?'

The big man smiled broadly back at him, revelling in his domination of the situation he had so clearly engineered.

'Oh, I wouldn't call this theatrical, Rutilius Scaurus, I'd be using the term *gladiatorial*.'

The tribune shook his head in bemusement.

'Gladiatorial? What, do you intend to turn your men loose on

us in some sort of pitched battle? What do you think the urban cohorts will make of that? I'm sure they'll be along soon enough, given the spectacle you made back there with so much illegal iron on the street.'

Albinus shook his head, his smile widening.

'Oh, I doubt it. The local tribune has managed to get himself rather deeper into debt than might have been sensible, so once I'd purchased that debt it was relatively easy to persuade him to keep his men clear of the area for rather more time than I need for this carefully constructed scenario to play out. Centurion?'

Cotta stepped forward, dropping a sword at Marcus's feet with a clang of iron on stone, and shot him another pointed glance that narrowed Julius's eyes with a sudden suspicion. The senator pointed to the weapon, his voice taking on a triumphant tone as he barked out an order.

'Pick up the sword, Valerius Aquila! Pick up the sword, and prepare to fight for your life!'

Scaurus stepped forward, his expression hardening, and a pair of Albinus's ex-legion bodyguards moved swiftly to block any attempt to approach their master.

'What the fuck are you playing at, *Decimus*?'

Albinus grinned back at him from behind his protectors.

'Nice try, Rutilius Scaurus, but no amount of impudence is going to distract me from delivering this lesson to you. Perhaps the death of your pet centurion will teach you to exercise a little more humility with your betters. Now, pick up the sword, *boy*, or I'll have my man here kill you anyway, defenceless or not.'

Marcus smiled tolerantly in the face of the insult, bending to take the sword by its hilt.

'Be warned, Roman . . .' Martos stepped forward to stand beside Scaurus and raised a finger to the senator, his expression murderous. 'If this man is harmed here while you hide behind those swords, I will find you and tear your heart from your body with my bare hands!'

Albinus raised his eyebrows in mock terror.

'And how will you make that happen, when a word from me

will see you dead on the cobbles beside him? Would anybody else like to consider volunteering for a place in the closest refuse pit? No? Let's be about it then! Centurion!

Cotta stepped forward, reaching forward to tap Marcus's blade with his own with an evil grin.

'You ready to fight, youngster?'

Marcus looked at Scaurus with a helpless shrug, discarding his toga on the square's cobbles for one of the senator's bodyguards to remove.

'This has been coming ever since this man and I laid eyes on each other that night on the Palatine Hill, Tribune.'

Scaurus nodded in reply, and the two men dropped into fighting crouches, each of them watching the other as they circled slowly. Cotta looked his opponent up and down, nodding reluctant approval at the younger man's muscular frame.

'You're a fighting soldier, from the look of you. Britannia, was it?' Marcus nodded, focusing intently on the other man's eyes as Cotta shook his head in apparent disgust. 'Full of tunic lifters and arse pokers, Britannia. It's a shame your old man didn't send you somewhere character-forming before they murdered him.'

The younger man feinted forward with the point of his gladius, watching in cold amusement as his opponent stepped back and parried easily.

'What, somewhere like Dacia?'

Cotta snorted his ridicule.

'Dacia? Land of cock suckers. And don't bother telling me about Germania either, the whole province is riddled with queers. No boy, if you want to be a real soldier then you need to get sand in your crack!'

He advanced swiftly, testing Marcus's defence with half a dozen swift strokes, grinning as the Tungrian retreated closer and closer to the men guarding the exit from the square. As his seventh cut sliced in low, aimed at Marcus's left thigh, the younger man tossed his sword into his left hand and parried it wide, stepping quickly forward and twisting to punch a half-fist into Cotta's right bicep

and then straightened his body, using the momentum to swing a vicious back fist at the grimacing centurion's face. Cotta barely managed to duck out of the blow's path, giving the younger man all the time he needed to swivel to his right and hook the veteran's leg with his extended left boot. The older man fell back onto the cobbles with a grunt of expelled breath, the sword falling from his nerveless fingers.

*'Get at him! Kill him while he's down!'*

Ignoring Dubnus's bellowed encouragement, Marcus bent to pick up the fallen weapon, watching as Cotta recovered his footing and took a sword from each of the two nearest men. The veteran stood out of sword's reach for a moment, breathing hard and appraising his opponent with a new respect.

'I heard you were taught to fight by a soldier and a gladiator. Which one of them taught you that little move?'

Marcus closed the distance between them, scraping the soles of his boots across the cobbles.

'The soldier, as I recall. He wasn't up to much when it came to swordplay, but he knew more than enough dirty tricks.'

Cotta raised his blades.

'Sounds like my kind of man. The gladiator must have been a faggot if he taught you to fight with two swords.'

Marcus shrugged again, his eyes locked on the points of Cotta's blades, stepping closer still until the tips of their swords were touching.

'He made a start. I perfected the style in a few battles that you might have heard of while you were lazing around Rome protecting fat-arsed politicians from their own stupidity.'

Both men lunged forward at the same time, their swords meeting each other and pushing wide as the soldier snapped his head forward to butt Marcus in the face, but the younger man was ready for the attack, ducking his head and then wrenching it back up to deliver a heavy blow to Cotta's chin. The former soldier staggered backwards, spitting blood from his bleeding tongue and spluttering with laughter.

'You cheeky young bastard!'

Marcus held his swords out ostentatiously wide of his body, then dropped them onto the ground with a clatter of iron on stone.

'Shall we go to bare knuckles then, Cotta, or have you had enough?'

The older man shook his head, tossing his own weapons aside and feeling his jaw.

'Fuck that, I think you've already broken one of my teeth.'

Albinus bridled, pointing at Marcus with a face contorted with rage.

'What the *fuck* are you doing, Cotta?! *Kill* him!'

The ex-centurion wiped the blood from his mouth, shaking his head with a tight smile of warning.

'If you want him dead so badly, Senator, you feel free to try to kill him.'

The senator put his face inches from the veteran's, his features twisted by a snarl of rage.

'I paid well for you to set up this cosy little business, Centurion, which means that I *own* you. Either you do as I tell you, and leave this traitor's spawn bleeding here in the street, or I'll have you . . .'

Something within Cotta snapped, abruptly and without warning, and Scaurus pursed his lips as the ex-soldier took a handful of his sponsor's toga.

'Paid me well, did you?' He reached into his belt purse and dropped a handful of gold coins onto the cobbles. 'There's your money, Senator!' He pulled the toga down until Albinus's head was level with his chest, bending to snarl into the terrified man's ear, grinding his words out through gritted teeth. 'And you'll have me what? Killed?' He laughed down into the senator's face. '*Hah!* I'll disembowel any man you send after me, and then I'll strangle you with the bastard's guts!'

Scaurus strolled forwards, patting Cotta on the arm.

'I think your point is made, Centurion.'

Albinus staggered back, propelled by a push from Cotta's broad hand, pointing a trembling finger at the former soldier.

‘If I can’t buy you, I’ll buy your men! Ten gold aurei for the man that puts his iron through that treacherous bastard’s guts!’

There was a moment of silence as the former soldier stared at him with naked disgust, until at length he spat bloody phlegm across the coins scattered at his feet. When he spoke his voice was cold, as if his anger had burned out and been replaced by something harder and more implacable.

‘You could offer them fifty apiece and I doubt you’d have any takers. We’ve something in common, these men and I, which is that we’ve all faced the empire’s enemies together, and bled, and lost our mates, while all *you’ve* ever done is sit on the back of a horse and come up with a succession of good ways for us to risk our lives to bring *you* glory. So I’ll give you two choices, Senator. You can leave now, with an escort of my men to protect you from the kind of scum who’ll take your purse and slap you about if you’re lucky, and drag you away never to be seen again if you’re not. Or you can open your mouth to say any words other than “*thank you, Cotta*” and then you’ll find out what it’s like to walk home alone with me following ten paces behind you, making sure every pimp, thug and murderer on the street knows just how vulnerable you are.’

He stood and stared at the white-faced Albinus, his expression still taut with anger.

‘Just three little words. Any *fucking* time you like, Senator . . .’

As the silence stretched out, Dubnus turned to a grinning Julius with a look of confusion, shaking his massive head in puzzlement.

‘Am I missing something here?’