

ARMS OF NEMESIS

A NOVEL OF ANCIENT ROME

STEVEN SAYLOR



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NEMESIS

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St. Martin's Minotaur
New York



To Penni Kimmel,
Helluo librorum et litterarum studiosus

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PART ONE

CORPSES, LIVING AND DEAD

1

For all his fine qualities—his honesty and devotion, his cleverness, his uncanny agility—Eco was not well suited for answering the door. Eco was mute.

But he was not and has never been deaf. He has, in fact, the sharpest ears of anyone I've ever known. He is also a light sleeper, a habit held over from the wretched, watchful days of his childhood before his mother abandoned him and I took him in from the street and finally adopted him. Not surprisingly, it was Eco who heard the knock at the door in the second hour after nightfall, when everyone in the household had gone to bed. It was Eco who greeted my nocturnal visitor, but was unable to send him away, short of shooing at him the way a farmer shoos an errant goose from his doorway.

Therefore, what else could Eco have done? He might have roused Belbo, my strongarm. Hulking and reeking of garlic and stupidly rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Belbo might have intimidated my visitor, but I doubt that he could have gotten rid of him; the stranger was persistent and twice as clever as Belbo is strong. So Eco did what he had to do; he made a sign for my visitor to wait in the doorway and came rapping gently at my door. Rapping having failed to rouse me—generous helpings of Bethesda's fish and barley soup washed down with white wine had sent me fast asleep—Eco gingerly opened the door, tiptoed into the room, and shook my shoulder.

Beside me Bethesda stirred and sighed. A mass of black hair had somehow settled across my face and neck. The shifting strands tickled my nose and lips. The odor of her perfumed henna sent a quiver of erotic tingling below my waist. I reached for her, making my lips into a kiss, running my hands over her body. How was it possible, I wondered, that she could reach all the way over and around me to tug at my shoulder from behind?

Eco never liked to make those grunting, half-animal noises eked out by the speechless, finding such measures degrading and embarrassing. He preferred to remain austere and silent, like the Sphinx, and let his hands speak for him. He gripped my shoulder harder and shook it just a bit more firmly. I recognized his touch then, as surely as one knows a familiar voice. I could even understand what he was saying.

"Someone at the door?" I mumbled, clearing my throat and keeping my eyes shut for a moment longer.

Eco gave my shoulder a little slap of assent, his way of saying "yes" in the dark.

I snuggled against Bethesda, who had turned her back on the disturbance. I touched my lips to her shoulder. She let out a breath, something between a coo and a sigh. In all my travels from the Pillars of Hercules to Babylon, I have never met a more responsive woman. Like an exquisitely crafted lyre, she thought to myself, perfectly tuned and polished, growing finer with the years; what a lucky man you are, Gordianus the Finder, what a find you made in that slave market in Alexandria fifteen years ago.

Somewhere under the sheets the kitten was stirring. Egyptian to her core, Bethesda has always kept cats and even invites them into our bed. This one was traversing the valley between our bodies, picking a path from thigh to thigh. So far it had kept its claws hidden; a good thing, since in the last few moments my most vulnerable part had grown conspicuously more vulnerable and the kitten seemed to be heading straight for it, perhaps thinking it was a serpent to play with. I snuggled again against Bethesda for protection. She sighed. I remembered a rainy night at least ten years ago, before Eco joined us—a different cat, a different bed, but the very same house, the house that my father left me.

and the two of us, Bethesda and myself, younger but not so very different from today. I dozed, nearly dreaming.

Two sharp slaps landed on my shoulder.

Two slaps was Eco's way of saying "no," like shaking his head. No, he would not or could not send my visitor away.

He tapped me again, twice sharply on the shoulder. "All right, all right!" I muttered. Bethesda rolled aggressively away, dragging the sheet with her and exposing me to the dank September air. The kitten tumbled toward me, sticking out its claws as it flailed for balance.

"Numa's balls!" I snapped, though it wasn't fabled King Numa who found himself wounded by a single tiny claw. Eco discreetly ignored my yelp of pain. Bethesda laughed sleepily in the darkness.

I snapped out of bed and fumbled for my tunic. Eco was already holding it ready for me to crawl into.

"This had better be important!" I said.

It was important, just how important I had no way of knowing that night, and not for some time after. If the emissary waiting in my vestibule had made himself clear, if he had been frank about why and from whom he had come, I would have bent to his wishes without the least hesitation. Such a case as such a client as fell into my lap that night are few and far between; I would have fought for the chance to take on the job. Instead, the man, who curtly introduced himself as Marcus Mummius, affected an air of portentous secrecy and treated me with a suspicion that bordered on contempt.

He told me that my services were needed, without delay, for a job that would take me away from Rome for several days. "Are you in some sort of trouble?" I asked.

"Not me!" he bellowed. He seemed incapable of talking in a tone of voice reasonable for a sleeping household. His words came out in a series of grunts and barks, the way that one speaks to an unruly slave or a bad dog. There is no language as ugly as Latin when it is spoken in such a fashion—barrack fashion, I mean, for as sleepy as I was and as numbed with the evening's wine, I was beginning to make certain deductions about my uninvited guest. Disguised behind his well-trimmed beard, his austere but expensive-looking black tunic, his finely made boots and plush woolen cloak, I saw a soldier, a man used to giving orders and being instantly obeyed.

"Well," he said, looking me up and down as if I were a lazy recruit fresh out of bed and dragging my feet before the day's march. "Are you coming or not?"

Eco, offended at such rudeness, put his hands on his hips and glowered. Mummius threw back his head and snorted in a fit of impatience.

I cleared my throat. "Eco," I said, "fetch me a cup of wine, please. Warmed, if you can; see if the embers are still glowing in the kitchen. And a cup for you as well, Marcus Mummius?" My guest scowled and shook his head sharply, like a good legionnaire on guard duty.

"Some warm cider, perhaps? No, I insist, Marcus Mummius. The night is cool. Come, follow me into my study. Look, Eco has already lit the lamps for us; he anticipates all my needs. Here, sit—no, I insist. Now, Marcus Mummius, I take it you've come here offering me work."

In the brighter light of the study I could see that Mummius looked worn and tired, as if he had not slept properly for some time. He fidgeted in his chair and held his eyes open with an unnatural alertness. After a moment he sprang up and began pacing, and when Eco came with his warm cider he refused to take it. Thus does a soldier on a long watch refuse to make himself comfortable for fear that sleep will come against his will.

"Yes," he finally said. "I have come to summon you—"

"Summon me? No one *summons* Gordianus the Finder. I am a citizen, no man's slave or freedman."

and at last report Rome was still a Republic, amazingly enough, and not a dictatorship. Other citizens come to consult me, to ask for my services, to *hire* me. And they usually come during daylight. At least the honest ones do.”

Mummius appeared to be working hard to contain his exasperation. “This is ridiculous,” he said. “You’ll be paid, of course, if that’s what you’re worried about. In fact, I’m authorized to offer you five times your regular daily pay, considering the inconvenience and the ... travel,” he said cautiously. “Five days of guaranteed pay, plus all your lodging and expenses.”

He had my full attention. From the corner of my eye I saw Eco raise an eyebrow, counseling me to be shrewd; children of the streets grow up to be hard bargainers. “Very generous, Marcus Mummius, very generous,” I said. “Of course you may not realize that I had to raise my rates only last month. Prices in Rome keep shooting up, what with this slave revolt and the invincible Spartacus rampaging through the countryside, spreading chaos—”

“Invincible?” Mummius seemed personally offended. “Spartacus invincible? We’ll soon see about that.”

“Invincible when confronted by a Roman army, I mean. The Spartacans have beaten every contingent sent against them; they’ve even sent two Roman consuls running home in disgrace. I suppose that when Pompey—”

“Pompey!” Mummius spat the name.

“Yes, I suppose that when Pompey finally manages to bring back his troops from Spain, the revolt will be quickly disposed of” I rambled on only because the topic seemed to irritate my guest, and I wanted to keep him distracted while I drove up my price.

Mummius cooperated gloriously, pacing, gnashing his teeth, glowering. But it seemed he would not descend to gossiping about a subject as important as the slave revolt. “We’ll see about that,” was all he would mutter, trying feebly to interrupt me. Finally he raised his voice to command level and effectively cut me off. “We’ll soon see about *Spartacus*! Now, then, you were saying something about your rates.”

I cleared my throat and took a sip of warm wine. “Yes. Well, as I was saying, with prices wildly out of control—”

“Yes, yes—”

“Well, I don’t know what you or your employer may have heard about my rates. I don’t know how you obtained my name or who recommended me.”

“Never mind that.”

“All right. Though you did say five times ...”

“Yes, five times your daily pay!”

“It might be rather steep, considering that my normal price ...” Eco had moved behind the man and was gesturing *up, up, up* with his thumb. “Eighty sesterces a day,” I said, wildly choosing a number from nowhere—about twice the monthly pay of a regular legionnaire.

Mummius looked at me oddly, and for a moment I thought I had gone too far. Ah, well, if he turned and stamped out of the house without another word, at least I could return to my warm bed at Bethesda. He was probably luring me on a fool’s errand, anyway.

Then he burst out laughing.

Even Eco was taken aback. I watched him over Mummius’s shoulder, wrinkling his eyebrow. “Eighty sesterces a day,” I said, as serenely as I could, trying not to mirror Eco’s confusion. “You don’t understand?”

“Oh, yes,” Mummius said, his barking barracks laughter reduced to a smirk.

“And five times that—”

“Four hundred a day!” he snapped. “I know my figures.” Then he snorted, with such sincere

contempt that I knew I could have demanded much more.

My work frequently brings me into contact with the wealthy classes of Rome. The rich need lawyers in their battles against each other; lawyers need information; obtaining information is my specialty. I have accepted fees from advocates like Hortensius and Cicero, and sometimes directly from clients distinguished as the great Metelli and Messallae families. But even they might balk at the idea of paying Gordianus the Finder a daily fee of four hundred sesterces. Just how wealthy was the client whom Marcus Mummius represented?

There was no question now that I would take the job. The money assured it—Bethesda would come with delight to see so much silver pour into the household coffers, and certain creditors might start greeting me with smiles again instead of unleashed dogs. But curiosity was the real trap. I wanted to know who had sent Marcus Mummius to my door. Still, I didn't want him to see that he had won me over quite yet.

"This investigation must be rather important," I said blandly, trying to sound professionally cool while fountains of silver coins splashed in my head. Four hundred sesterces a day, multiplied by five guaranteed days of work, equaled two thousand sesterces. At last I could have the back wall of the house repaired, have new tiles laid to replace the cracked ones in the atrium, perhaps even afford a new slave girl to help Bethesda with her duties

Mummius nodded gravely. "It's as important a case as you're ever likely to be called for."

"And sensitive, I take it."

"Extremely."

"Requiring discretion."

"Great discretion," he agreed.

"I assume that more than mere property is at stake. Honor, then?"

"More than honor," said Mummius gravely, with a haunted look in his eyes.

"A life, then? A life at stake?" From the look on his face I knew that we were talking about a case of murder. A fat fee, a mysterious client, a murder—I had no resistance left. I did my best to make my face a blank.

Mummius looked very grave—the way that men look on a battlefield, not in the rush of excitement before the killing, but afterward, amid the carnage and despair. "Not a life," he said slowly, "not merely a single life at stake, but many lives. Scores of lives—men, women, children—all hang in the balance. Unless something is done to stop it, blood will flow like water, and the wailing of babies will be heard in the very Jaws of Hades."

I finished my wine and set it aside. "Marcus Mummius, will you not tell me outright who sent you and what it is you want me to do?"

He shook his head. "I've said too much as it is. Perhaps, by the time we arrive, the crisis will be over, the problem solved, and there'll be no need for you after all. In that case, it's best that you know nothing, now or ever."

"No explanation?"

"None. But you'll be paid, no matter what."

I nodded. "How long will we be away from Rome?"

"Five days, as I said before."

"You seem very sure."

"Five days," he assured me, "and then you can return to Rome. Unless it's sooner. But no longer than that. In five days all will be finished, one way or another, for better . . . or for worse."

"I see," I said, not seeing at all. "And where exactly are we going?"

Mummius pressed his lips tightly shut.

"Because," I said, "I'm not at all sure that I care to be traipsing about the countryside just now."

without even an idea of where I'm headed. There's a little slave revolt going on; I believe we were discussing it only a moment ago. My sources in the countryside tell me that unnecessary travel is highly inadvisable."

"You'll be safe," Mummius snapped with authority.

"Then I have your word as a soldier—or is it ex-soldier?—that I won't be placed in tactical jeopardy?"

Mummius narrowed his eyes. "I said you'll be safe."

"Very well. Then I think I shall leave Belbo here, for Bethesda's protection; I'm sure your employer can supply me with a bodyguard if I require it. But I shall want to bring Eco with me. I take it your employer's generosity will extend to feeding him and giving him a place to sleep?"

He looked over his shoulder at Eco with a skeptical gleam in his eye. "He's only a boy."

"Eco is eighteen; he put on his first manly toga over two years ago."

"Mute, isn't he?"

"Yes. Ideal for a soldier, I should think."

Mummius grunted. "I suppose you can take him."

"When do we leave?" I asked.

"As soon as you're ready."

"In the morning, then?"

He looked at me as if I were a lazy legionnaire asking for a nap before a battle. The commander's edge returned to his voice. "No, as soon as you're ready! We've wasted enough time as it is!"

"Very well," I yawned. "I'll just tell Bethesda to gather up a few of my things—"

"That won't be necessary." Mummius pulled himself up to his full height, still weary-looking but happy to be in charge at last. "Anything you need will be supplied to you."

Of course; a client willing to pay four hundred sesterces a day could certainly supply me with necessities like a change of clothing or a comb or a slave to carry my things. "Then I'll take only a moment to say good-bye to Bethesda."

I was stepping out of the room when Mummius cleared his throat. "Just to be sure," he said, looking at me and Eco in turn, "I don't suppose either one of you has a problem with seasickness?"

2

“But where is the man taking you?” Bethesda demanded to know. (Yes, “demanded”; never mind her status as a slave. If her impertinence seems unlikely, that is because you have not met Bethesda. “Who is he? What makes you think he can be trusted? What if he’s been sent by one of your old enemies, just to lure you away from the city where he can slit your throat with no one to see?”

“Bethesda, if someone cared to slit my throat, they could go to far less trouble and do the job right here in the Subura. They could hire an assassin on any street corner.”

“Yes, and that’s why you have Belbo to protect you. Why aren’t you taking him with you?”

“Because I would rather he stayed here to protect you and the other slaves in my absence, so that you won’t have to worry about you while I’m gone.”

Even roused from sleep in the middle of the night, Bethesda was spectacular. Her hair, black with strands of silver, tumbled about her face in unkempt glory. Even pouting, she maintained that same aura of unshakable dignity that had first drawn me to her in the slave market at Alexandria fifteen years ago. I felt a shiver of doubt, as I always do at parting with her. The world is an unsafe and uncertain place, and the life I have chosen often courts danger. I learned long ago not to show my doubts. Bethesda did the opposite.

“It’s a great deal of money,” I told her.

She snorted. “If he tells the truth.”

“I think he does. A man doesn’t survive in a city like Rome for as long as I have without gaining a grain of judgment. Marcus Mummius is honest, insofar as he can be. Not very forthcoming, I’ll admit.”

“But he won’t even tell you who sent him!”

“Indeed, he won’t tell me, but he openly admits that he won’t. In other words, he tells the truth.”

Bethesda made a rude noise with her lips. “You sound like one of those orators you’re always working for, like that ridiculous Cicero, saying truth is a lie and a lie is the truth, however it happens to suit you.”

I bit my tongue and took a deep breath. “Trust me, Bethesda. I’ve stayed alive until now, haven’t I?” I looked into her eyes and thought I saw a slight warmth amid the cold fire. I laid my hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off and turned away. So it always goes.

I stepped closer and put my hands on the back of her neck, sliding them under the cascades of her hair. She had no right to refuse me, and did not draw away, but she stiffened at my touch and held her head high, even when I bent to kiss her ear. “I will come back,” I said. “After five days I return. So the man promises.”

I saw her cheeks tighten and her jaw tremble. She blinked rapidly, and I noticed the fan of wrinkles that time had gathered at the outer corner of her eye. She stared at the blank wall before her. “It would be different if I knew where you were going.”

I smiled. Bethesda had known only two cities in her life, Alexandria and Rome, and except for the voyage between has never ventured a mile outside either one. What could it matter to her whether she was going to Cumae or Carthage?

“Well,” I sighed, “if it will give you any comfort, I suspect that Eco and I will be spending the next few days somewhere in the vicinity of Baiae. You’ve heard of it, haven’t you?”

She nodded.

“It’s a beautiful little region down the coast,” I said, “inside the Cape of Misenum, situated on the bay ~~which the locals call the Cup, across the water from Puteoli and Pompeii.~~ They say the views of Capri and Vesuvius are quite splendid. The richest of the rich build fine homes on the seashore and bathe in hot mud.”

“But how do you know where you’re going if the man won’t tell you?”

“It’s only a guess.”

Bethesda softened beneath my touch. She sighed, and I knew that she was reconciled to my going and to the prospect of being the mistress of the house for a few days, having sole command over the other slaves. From previous experience, I knew that in my absence she was a thoroughly ruthless tyrant. I only hoped that Belbo would be able to bear up under her harsh rule. The thought made me smile.

I turned and saw that Eco waited in the doorway. For an instant his face held an expression of intense fascination; then he crossed his arms and rolled his eyes, as if to deny any interest or sympathy with the moment of tenderness he had interrupted. I quickly kissed Bethesda’s cheek and turned to go.

Marcus Mummius was pacing in the vestibule, looking weary and impatient. He threw up his hands when I appeared and hurried out the door, not even waiting for me to catch up, only giving me a look over his shoulder that showed what he thought of wasting so much time to say good-bye to a woman and a slave at that.

We hurried down the steep path that descends the Esquiline hill, watching for pitfalls by the light of Eco’s torch. Where the path ended, spilling into the Subura Way, four horses and two men awaited us.

Mummius’s men looked and acted like legionnaires out of uniform. Beneath their light woollen cloaks I caught the glint of knives, which made me feel safer at the prospect of venturing through Roman streets after dark. I reached inside my cloak and touched my own dagger. Mummius had said that all my needs would be supplied, but I preferred to bring my own weapon.

Mummius had not counted on Eco, so I was given the strongest mount and he rode behind me, clutching my waist. Where my body is broad and thick through the shoulders and chest (and in recent years, through the middle as well), Eco’s is thin and wiry; his added weight was hardly enough for the beast to notice.

The evening was mild, with only a faint early autumn chill in the air, but the streets were nearly deserted. In times of trouble, Romans shun the darkness and lock up their houses at sundown, leaving the streets to pimps, drunks, and thrill seekers. So it was in the turmoil of the civil wars and the gloomy years of Sulla’s dictatorship; so it was again now that the revolt of the Spartacans was on everyone’s lips. Terrifying stories were told in the Forum about whole villages where citizens had been overwhelmed and roasted alive by slaves who ate their former masters for dinner. After sundown Romans refused party invitations and vacated the streets. They locked their bedchamber doors to keep out even their most trusted slaves while they slept, and they woke up from nightmares drenched in sweat. Chaos was loose in the world again, and his name was Spartacus.

We clattered through the Subura past alleys that stank of urine and rotting garbage. Our way was lit here and there by the glow from open windows along the overhanging upper stories; snatches of music and drunken laughter wafted over our heads and faded behind us. Above us, the stars looked very far away and very cold, a sign of a frosty winter to come. It would be warmer down in Baiae, I thought, where summer lingers in Vesuvius’s shadow.

The Subura Way emptied at last into the Forum, where the hooves of our horses echoed unnaturally loud about the deserted squares and temples. We skirted the more sacred areas, where horses are not allowed even by night, and headed south across the narrow valley between the Capitoline and Palatine

hills. The smell of straw and dung predominated as we passed by the great cattle market of the Forum Boarium, quiet except for the occasional lowing of the beasts in their pens. The enormous bronze colossus on its pedestal loomed above us, a great horned silhouette against the starry sky, like a giant minotaur poised on a ledge.

I tapped Eco's leg and he leaned forward, bringing his ear to my lips. "It's as I thought," he whispered. "We make for the Tiber. Are you sleepy?"

He tapped me emphatically twice.

"Good." I laughed. "Then you keep watch while we drift downriver to Ostia."

More of Mummius's men waited on the riverbank, ready to take our horses as we dismounted. At the end of the longest pier our boat was ready. If in my sleepiness I had pictured a slow, casual journey down the Tiber to the coast, I was mistaken. The boat was not the tiny skiff I had imagined, but a small barge oared by a dozen slaves with a helmsman at the rear and a canopy amidships, a vessel built for speed and strength. Mummius wasted no time in ushering us aboard. His two bodyguards followed, and we cast off immediately.

"You can sleep if you care to," he said, indicating the space beneath the canopy, where a mound of blankets had been haphazardly tossed. "Not very luxurious, and there's no slave woman to keep you warm, but there are no lice. Unless they've crawled off one of this lot." He gave a sharp kick to the shoulder of one of the rowers. "Row!" he bellowed. "And you'd better keep sharper time than you did on the journey upriver, or I'll have the lot of you moved onto the big ship for good." He laughed without mirth. Back in his element, Mummius was beginning to show a more jovial personality, and I was not sure I liked what I saw. He placed one of his men in charge and crawled under the blankets.

"Wake me if you need to," I whispered to Eco, squeezing his hand to make sure I had his attention. "Or sleep if you can; I doubt there's danger." Then I joined Mummius beneath the tent, nestling against its farther edge and trying hard not to think of my own bed and the warmth of Bethesda's body.

I tried to sleep, but without much success. The creaking of manacles, the sluicing of the oars through the water, and the unending churning of the river against the bottom of the barge finally lulled me into a fitful half sleep, from which I woke over and over, always to the sound of Marcus Mummius snoring. The fourth time I awoke to the raucous noise I poked my foot from under my blankets and gave him a gentle kick. He stopped for a moment and then resumed, making noises like a man slowly being strangled to death. I heard low chuckles of laughter and rose on my elbows to see his two guardsmen smiling back at me from the prow. They stood close together, talking quietly, wide awake. I looked behind and saw the helmsman at his station, a bearded giant who seemed to see and hear nothing but the river. Eco crouched nearby, gazing over the low bulwark into the water, looking like a statue of Narcissus contemplating his reflection beneath the starry sky.

Eventually Mummius's snoring quieted and blended with the slapping of water on wood and the steady, rhythmic breathing of the rowers, but still the deep, healing embrace of Morpheus eluded me. I tossed and turned uneasily inside the blankets, too hot and then too cold, my thoughts straying down blind alleys and doubling back on themselves. Dozing brought sluggishness without rest, stillness without refreshment; when we at last reached Ostia and the sea, I was a duller man than the one Marcus Mummius had lured from his bed some hours before. In the strange disjuncture of time and space that clouded my mind I imagined that the night would never end and we would journey into darkness forever.

Mummius ushered us from the barge onto a pier. The bodyguards came with us, but the rowers were left behind, ~~gasping and bent double over their oars in exhaustion. I glanced back for a moment~~ their broad naked backs heaving and glinting with sweat in the starlight. One of them leaned over the bow and began to vomit. At some point during the journey I had stopped hearing their ragged breathing and the steady grating of the oars; I had forgotten them completely as one forgets the wheel of a grinding machine. Who notices a wheel until it needs oiling, or a slave until he turns sick, hungry or violent? I shivered and pulled the blanket around my shoulders to shut out the chilly sea air.

Mummius led us along the riverfront. Beneath the boardwalk I heard the soft lapping of waves against the wooden posts. To our right were clustered a fleet of small riverboats chained to the dock. To our left ran a low stone wall with crates and baskets piled against it in a wild confusion of shadows. Beyond the wall was the sleeping town of Ostia. Here and there I glimpsed the lit window of an upper story, and at intervals there were lamps set into the city wall, but other than ourselves not a living person was stirring. The light played strange tricks; I imagined I saw a family of beggars huddled in a corner, then saw a rat come racing from the heap, which before my eyes resolved itself into nothing more than a pile of rags.

I tripped against a loose plank. Eco grabbed my shoulder to steady me, then Mummius almost knocked me down with a slap across the back. "Didn't you sleep well enough?" he barked in his barracks voice. "I can manage on two hours a day. In the army you learn to sleep standing up, even marching, if you have to."

I nodded dully. We walked past warehouses and jetties, through shut-down markets and shipyard. The smell of salt grew stronger on the air, and the vague hissing of the sea joined with the steady lapping of the river. We came to the end of the docks, where the Tiber abruptly broadens and empties into the sea. The city wall swung away to the south, and a vast, starlit prospect of calm waters opened before us. Here another, larger boat awaited us. Mummius ushered us down the steps and into the hold. He barked at the overseer and the boat cast off.

The dock receded. The waves began to swell around us. Eco looked alarmed and clutched my sleeve. "Don't worry," I told him. "We won't be on this boat for long."

A moment later, as we navigated around a shallow, rocky promontory, the vessel came in sight. "A trireme!" I whispered.

"The *Fury*, she's called," said Mummius, seeing my surprise and smiling proudly.

I had expected a large ship, but nothing as large as this one. Three masts, their sails cowed, rose from the deck. Three rows of oars projected from her belly. It hardly seemed possible that such a hulking monster had been dispatched merely to fetch a single man. Mummius lit a torch and waved it over his head. A torch was lit on deck and waved back at us. As we drew nearer, men suddenly swarmed about the deck and up the masts, as quiet as ghosts in the starlight. The oars, retracted from the water, stirred like the quivering legs of a centipede and dipped downward. Sails unfurled and snapped taut in the soft breeze. Mummius wet his finger and held it aloft. "Not much of a wind, but steady to the south. Good!"

We drew abreast. A rope ladder was lowered. Eco scrambled up first and I followed. Marcus Mummius came last and pulled up the ladder behind him. The smaller boat drew away, back toward Ostia. Mummius walked quickly up and down the length of the ship, giving orders. The *Fury* heaved and swung about. The steady rhythm of oarsmen groaning in unison rose up through the boards, and on either side there was a great splash as the first stroke sliced into the waves. I looked back at Ostia, the narrow beach that fronted the city's shoreward side and the tiled rooftops that rose above the walls. The town receded with stunning speed; the walls dwindled, the gulf of dark water grew greater and greater. Rome suddenly seemed very far away.

Marcus Mummius, busy with the crew, ignored us. Eco and I found a quiet spot and did our best

sleep, leaning against each other and huddling in our blankets to shut out the chill of the open sea.

Suddenly Mummius was shaking me awake.

“What are you doing on deck? A pampered city dweller like you will take a fever and die from the damp air. Come on, both of you, there’s a room for you at the stern.”

We followed him, stumbling over coils of rope and hidden hatches. The first rays of dawn were breaking over the dark hills to the east. Mummius led us down a short flight of steps and into a tiny room with two pallets, side by side. I fell onto the nearer one and shuddered at the pleasant shock of feeling myself submerged in a thick mattress of the finest goose down. Eco took the other and began to yawn and stretch like a cat. I pulled my blanket up around my neck, already half-asleep, and vaguely wondered if Mummius had allowed us to take his own accommodations.

I opened my eyes and saw him standing with his arms crossed, leaning against the wall in the hallway outside. His face was barely visible in the pale light of dawn, but there could be no doubt, from the gentle flutter of his eyelids and the slackness of his jaw, that Marcus Mummius, an honest soldier and no boaster, was fast asleep and dreaming, standing up.

3

I woke with a start, wondering where I was. It must have been morning, because even at my most dissolute I seldom sleep until noon, and yet the bright sunlight streaming into the window above my head had the soft quality of afternoon light in early autumn. The earth seemed to shudder, but not with the sudden convulsion of an earthquake. The house creaked and groaned all about me, and when I started to rise I felt my elbows sink into a vast, bottomless pillow of down.

A vaguely familiar voice drifted in from the porthole above my head, a gruff soldier's voice shouting orders, and I remembered all at once.

Next to me Eco groaned and blinked open his eyes. I managed to pull myself up and sat on the edge of the bed, which seemed to be trying to pull me back into the soft, forgetful haze of that luxurious mountain of down. I shook my head to clear it. A ewer of water was hooked into a bracket on the wall. I picked it up by both handles and drank a long draft, then scooped my hands full of water to splash on my face.

"Don't waste it," a voice barked. "That's fresh water from the Tiber. For drinking, not washing." I looked up to see Marcus Mummius standing in the doorway with his arms crossed, looking bright and alert and flashing the superior smile of an early riser. He had changed into military garb, a tunic of red linen and red leather beneath a coat of mail armor.

"What time is it?"

"Two hours past noon. Or as they say on land, the ninth hour of the day. You've done nothing but sleep and snore since you fell into that bed last night." He shook his head. "A real Roman shouldn't be able to sleep on a bed that soft. Leave that kind of nonsense to fancy Egyptians, I say. I thought you were taken ill, but I'm told that dying men never snore, so I decided it couldn't be too serious." He laughed and I enjoyed the grim fantasy of imagining him suddenly spitted on a fancy Egyptian spear.

I shook my head again. "How much longer? On this ship, I mean?"

He wrinkled his brow. "That would be telling, wouldn't it?"

I sighed. "Let me ask you this way: How much longer until we reach Baiae?"

Mummius looked suddenly seasick. "I never said—"

"Indeed you did not. You're a good soldier, Marcus Mummius, and you divulged nothing to me that you were sworn to conceal. Still, I'm curious to know when we'll come to Baiae."

"What makes you think—"

"I *think*, Marcus Mummius; exactly. I would hardly be the man your employer was seeking if I couldn't figure out a simple riddle such as our destination. First, we are most assuredly heading south. I'm not much of a sailor, but I do know the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, and since the afternoon sun is on our right and the coast on our left, I deduce we must be sailing south. Given the fact that you promise that my work will be done in five days, we can hardly be going beyond Italy. Where else, then, but a town on the southern coast, and most likely on the Cup? Oh, perhaps I'm wrong in choosing Baiae; it could be Puteoli, or Neapolis or even Pompeii, but I think not. Anyone as wealthy as your employer—able to pay five times my fee without a qualm, able to send a ship such as this on what seems to be a whim—anyone that rich is going to have a house at Baiae, because Baiae is where any Roman who can afford it builds a summer villa. Besides, yesterday you said something about the Jaws of Hades."

"I never—"

“Yes, you said many lives were at stake, and you spoke of babies wailing in the Jaws of Hades. Now, you could have been speaking in metaphors, like a poet, but I suspect there is a conspicuous absence of poetry in your soul, Marcus Mummius. You carry a sword, not a lyre, and when you said ‘Jaws of Hades’ you meant the words literally. I’ve never seen it for myself, but the Greek colonists who originally settled around the Cup believed they had located an entrance to the underworld in a sulphurous crater called Lake Avernus—also known as the Jaws of Hades, Hades being the Greek word for the underworld, which old-fashioned Romans still call Orcus. The place is only a brisk walk I hear, from the finest homes in Baiae.”

Mummius looked at me shrewdly. “You are a sharp one,” he finally said. “Maybe you’ll be worth your fee, after all.” I heard no sarcasm in his voice. Instead there was a kind of sadness, as if he truly hoped I would succeed at my task, but expected me to fail.

An instant later Mummius was swaggering out the door and bellowing over his shoulder. “I suppose you’ll be hungry, after snoring all day. There’s food in the mess cabin amidships, probably better than what you’re used to at home. Too rich for me—I prefer a skin of watery wine and a hard crust of bread—but the owner always stocks the best, or what the merchants tell him is best, which means whatever is most expensive. After you eat you can take a long nap.” He laughed. “Might as well, you’ll only get in the way if you’re awake. Passengers are pretty useless on a ship. Not much for them to do. Might as well pretend you’re a bag of grain and find a spot to gather mold. Follow me.”

By changing the subject, Marcus Mummius had avoided admitting that Baiae was our destination. There was no point in pressing the matter; I already knew where we were going, and now a great matter weighed on my thoughts, for I was beginning to suspect that I knew the identity of my mysterious new employer. Who could have afforded so ostentatious a means of transport for a mere hireling, and a barely reputable one like Gordianus the Finder, at that? Pompey, perhaps, could muster such resources on a private whim, but Pompey was in Spain. Who then but the man reputed to be the richest Roman alive, indeed the richest Roman who had ever lived—but what could Marcus Licinius Crassus want of me, when he owned whole cities of slaves and could afford the services of any free man he desired?

I might have badgered Mummius with more questions, but decided I had taxed his patience enough. I followed him into the afternoon sunlight and caught a whiff of roasted lamb on the bracing sea breeze. My stomach roared like a lion, and I abandoned curiosity to satisfy a more pressing appetite.

Mummius was wrong to think that I would be bored with nothing to do on the *Fury*, at least as long as the sun was up. The ever-changing vista of the coast of Italy, the wheeling gulls overhead, the work of the sailors, the play of sunlight on water, the schools of fish that darted below the surface, the crisp tangy air of a day that was no longer summer but not quite autumn—all this was more than enough to occupy me until the sun went down.

Eco was even more entranced. Everything fascinated him. A pair of dolphins joined us at twilight and swam alongside the ship until long after darkness had fallen, darting in and out of the splashing wake. At times they seemed to laugh like men, and Eco mimicked the sound in return, as if he shared a secret language with them. When at last they disappeared beneath the foam and did not return, he went smiling to his bed and fell fast asleep.

I was not so lucky. Having slept most of the day, I faced a sleepless night. For a while the shadow of the coast and the sparkle of stars on the water charmed me quite as much as had the luminous afternoon, but then the night grew colder, and I took to my bed. Marcus Mummius was right: The bed was too soft, or else the blanket was too rough, or the faint starlight through the porthole was too distracting, or the noises Eco made in his sleep, mimicking the dolphins’ laughter, grated on my ears. I could not

sleep.

Then I heard the drum. It came from somewhere below, a hollow, throbbing beat, slower than my own pulse but just as steady. I had been so exhausted the night before that I had not heard it; now I found it impossible to ignore. It was the beat that drove the slaves at their oars below deck, setting the rhythm that carried the ship closer and closer to Baiae. The more I tried not to hear it, the louder it seemed to rise up through the planks, beating, beating, beating. The longer I tossed and turned, the further sleep seemed to recede.

I found myself trying to recollect the face of Marcus Crassus, the richest man in Rome. I had seen him a hundred times in the Forum, but his visage escaped me. I counted money in my head, imagining the soft jingle of coins in a purse, and spent my fee a dozen times over. I thought of Bethesda; I imagined her sleeping alone with the kitten curled up between her breasts, and I traced a path by memory from room to room through my house in Rome, like an invisible phantom standing guard. Abruptly an image rose unbidden in my mind, of Belbo lying across my portal in a drunken stupor with the door wide open for any thief or assassin to step inside

I gave a start and sat upright. Eco turned in his sleep and made a chattering noise. I strapped on my shoes, wrapped the blanket around me like a cloak, and returned to the deck.

Here and there sailors lay huddled together in sleep. A few strolled the deck, watchful and alert for any danger from the sea or shore. A steady breeze blew from the north, filling the sail and raising gooseflesh wherever the blanket did not cover my arms and legs. I strolled once about the deck, then found myself drawn toward the portal amidships that led down into the galley.

It is curious that a man can sail upon many ships in his life and never wonder at the hidden motives and power that drives them, yet this is how most people live their lives every day—men eat and dress and go about their business, and never give a thought to all the sweat of all the slaves who labored to grind the grain and spin the cloth and pave the roads, wondering about these things no more than they wonder about the blood that heats their bodies or the mucus that cradles their brains.

I stepped through the portal and down the steps. Instantly a wave of heat struck my face, warm and stifling like rising steam. I heard the dull, throbbing boom of the drum and the shuffling of many men. I smelled them before I saw them. All the odors that the human body can produce were concentrated in that airless space, rising up like the breath of demons from a sulphurous pit. I took another step downward into a world of living corpses, thinking that the Jaws of Hades could hardly lead to a more terrible netherworld than this.

The place was like a long, narrow cavern. Here and there lamps suspended from the ceiling cast a lurid glow across the pale naked bodies of the oarsmen. At first, in the dimness, I saw only a general impression of rippling movements everywhere around me, like the writhing of maggots. As my eyes adjusted I slowly made out the details.

Down the center ran a narrow aisle, like a suspended bridge. On each side slaves were stationed in three tiers, three-deep. Those against the hull were able to sit at their stations, expending the least effort to power their shorter oars. Those in the middle were seated higher and had to brace themselves against the footrest with each backward pull, then rise from their seats to push the oars forward. Those on the outer aisle were the unlucky ones. They ran the catwalk, shuffling back and forth to push their oars in a great circle, stretching onto their toes at full extension, then kneeling and lurching forward to lift the oars out of the water. Each slave was manacled to his oar by a rusted link of chain around one wrist.

There were hundreds of them packed tightly together, rubbing against one another as they pushed and pulled and strained. I thought of cattle or goats pressed together in a pen, but animals move without purpose. Here each man was like a tiny wheel in a vast, constantly moving machine. The drumbeat drove them.

I turned and saw the drummer at the stern, on a low bench that must have been just below my beam.

His legs were spread wide apart. His knees grasped the rim of a low, broad drum. Thongs were wrapped around each hand, and at the end of each thong was a leather ball. One by one he lifted the balls in the air and brought them down upon the skin of the drum, sending out a low pulse that throbbed through the dense, warm air. He sat with his eyes closed and a faint smile on his face as if he were dreaming, but the rhythm never faltered.

Beside him stood another man, dressed like a soldier and holding a long whip in his right hand. He glowered when he saw me, then snapped his whip in the air as if to impress me. The slaves nearest him shuddered and some of them groaned, as if a wave of pain passed over them.

I pressed the blanket over my mouth and nose to filter the stench. Where the lamplight penetrated through the maze of catwalks and manacled feet, I saw that the bilge was awash with a mixture of feces and urine and vomit and bits of rotting food. How could they bear it? Did they grow used to it over time, the way men grow accustomed to the clasp of manacles? Or did it never cease to nauseate them, just as it sickened me?

There are religious sects in the East which postulate abodes of eternal punishment for the shades of the wicked. Their gods are not content to see a man suffer in this world, but will pursue him with fire and torment into the next. Of this I know nothing, but I do know that if a place of damnation exists here on earth, it is surely within the bowels of a Roman galley, where men are forced to work their bodies to ruination amid the stench of their own sweat and vomit and excreta, playing out their anguish against the maniacal, never-ending pulse of the drum. To become mere fuel, to be consumed, drained, and discarded with hardly a thought, is surely as horrible a damnation as any god could contrive.

They say most men die after three or four years in the galleys; the lucky ones die before that. A captive prisoner or a slave guilty of theft, if given the choice, will go to the mines or become a gladiator before he will serve in the galleys. Of all the cruel sentences of death that can be meted out to a man, slavery in the galley is considered by all to be the cruelest. Death comes, but not before the last measure of strength has been squeezed from a man's body and the last of his dignity has been annihilated by suffering and despair.

Men become monsters in the galleys. Some ship captains never rotate the positions of the slaves; a man who rows for day after day, month after month on the same side, especially if he runs the catwalk, develops great muscles on one side of his body out of all proportion to the other. At the same time his flesh grows pale as a fish from lack of sunlight. If such a man escapes, he is easily detected by his deformity. Once in the Subura I saw a troop of private guards dragging such a man from a brothel, naked and screaming. Eco, then only a boy, had been horrified by the slave's appearance, and then, after I had explained it, had begun to weep.

Men become gods in the galley, as well. Crassus, if indeed he was the owner of this ship, took care to rotate his rowers, or else used them up more quickly than most, for I saw no lopsided monsters among them. Instead I saw young men with deep chests and great shoulders and arms, and among them a few older survivors with even more massive physiques, like a crew of bearded Apollos sprinkled with a hoary Hercules here and there, at least from the neck down. Above the neck the faces were all too human, wretched with care and suffering.

As I looked from face to face, most of them averted their eyes, as if my gaze could hurt them as surely as the whipmaster's lash. But a few of them dared to look back at me. I saw eyes dulled by endless labor and monotony; eyes envious of a man who possessed the simple freedom to walk about at will, to wipe the sweat from his face, to clean himself after defecating. In some eyes I saw lurking fear and hatred, and in others a kind of fascination, almost a lust, the kind of naked stare that a starving man might cast on a glutton.

A kind of fever seized me, warm and trancelike, as I walked down the long central aisle between the

naked slaves, my nostrils filled with the smell of their flesh, my skin awash in the humid heat of the straining bodies, my eyes roving among the great congregation of suffering constantly asway in the darkness. I was a man in a dream watching other men in a nightmare.

Away from the drummer's platform and the central stairway, the lamps grew fewer, but here and there a bit of moonlight found its way into the dim hold, shining silver-blue on the sweat-glazed arms and shoulders of the rowers, gleaming dully upon the manacles that kept their hands locked in place upon the oars. The dull beat of the drum grew softer as it receded behind me, but continued slow and steady, setting an easy nocturnal pace, its constant rhythm as hypnotic as the hissing murmur of the waves sluicing against the prow.

I reached the end of the walkway. I turned and looked back, over the laboring multitude. Suddenly I had seen enough; I hurried toward the exit. Ahead of me, illuminated by lamplight as if on a stage, I saw the whipmaster look toward me and nod knowingly. Even at a distance I could see the disdain on his face. This was his domain; I was an intruder, a curiosity seeker, too soft and too pampered for such a place. He cracked his whip over his head for my benefit and smiled at the wave of groans that passed through the slaves at his feet.

I put one foot upon the stair and would have followed with the other, but a face in the lamplight stopped me. The boy must have reminded me of Eco, and that was why I noticed his face among all the others. His place was in the highest tier along the aisle. When he turned to look at me a beam of moonlight fell upon one cheek, casting his face half in moonlight, half in lamplight, split between pale blue and orange. Despite his massive shoulders and chest, he was hardly more than a child. Along with the filth that smudged his cheeks and the suffering in his eyes, there was a strange look of innocence about him. His dark features were strikingly handsome, his prominent nose and mouth wide, dark eyes suggestive of the East. As I studied him in the moonlight, he dared to look back at me and then actually smiled—a sad, pathetic smile, tentative and fearful.

I thought of how easily Eco might have ended up in such a place if I had not found him and taken him home that day long ago—a boy with a strong body, without a tongue or a family to defend himself, might easily be waylaid and sold at auction. I looked back at the slave boy. I tried to smile in return, but could not.

Suddenly a man descended the stairs and pushed roughly past me, then hurried toward the stern. He shouted something and the drumbeat abruptly accelerated to twice its tempo. There was a great lurch as the ship bolted forward. I fell against the rail of the stairs. The increase in speed was astounding.

The drum boomed louder and louder, faster and faster. The messenger pushed past me again, heading up to the deck. I grabbed the sleeve of his tunic. "Pirates!" he said, with a theatrical lilt in his voice. "Two ships slipped out of a hidden cove as we passed. They're after us now." His face was grim, but as he tore himself from my grip, astonishingly enough, I thought I saw him laughing.

I began to follow him, then stopped, arrested by the sudden spectacle all around me. The drum boomed faster. The rowers groaned and followed the tempo. The whipmaster swaggered up the aisle. He cracked his whip in the air, loosening his arm. The rowers cringed.

The beat grew faster. The rowers at the outer edges of the ship were able to stay in their seats, but those along the aisle were abruptly driven to their toes by the heightened motion of the oars scrambling to keep up, stretching their arms high in the air to keep the gyrating oars under control. Manacled to the wood, they had no choice.

The beat accelerated even more. The vast machine was at full throttle. The oars moved in great circles at a mad tempo. The slaves pumped with all their might. Horrified but unable to look away, I studied their grimacing faces—jaws clenched, eyes burning with fear and confusion.

There was a loud snap and a crack, as if one of the great oars had suddenly split asunder, so close that I covered my face. In the same instant the boy who had smiled at me threw back his head. He

mouth wrenched open in a silent howl.

The whipmaster raised his arm again. The lash slithered through the air. The boy shrieked as if he had been scalded. I saw the lash slither across his naked shoulders. He faltered against the oar, tripping on the catwalk. For a long moment he hung suspended from the manacles around his wrists. Then he was dragged forward, backward and up again. As he hung from the highest point, desperately trying to find his balance, the whip lashed against his thighs.

The boy screamed, convulsed and fell again. The oar carried him for another revolution. He somehow found his grip and joined in the effort, every muscle straining. The lash struck again. The drumbeat boomed. The whip rose and fell. Squealing and gasping from the pain, the boy danced like a spastic. His broad shoulders convulsed at the whipmaster's rhythm, out of time with the great machine. His face contorted in agony. He cried like a child. The whipmaster struck him again and again.

I looked at the man's face. He smiled grimly back at me, showing a mouth full of rotten teeth, then turned and spat across the shoulders of one of the straining slaves. He looked me in the eye and raised his whip again, as if daring me to interfere. With a single voice the rowers groaned, like a tragic chorus. I looked at the boy, who never ceased rowing. He looked back at me and moved his lips, unable to speak.

Suddenly I heard footsteps from above. The messenger returned, holding up his open hand as a signal to the drummer. "All clear! All clear!" he shouted.

The drumbeat abruptly ceased. The oars were still. The sudden quiet was broken only by the lapping of waves against the ship, the creaking of wood, and the hoarse, gasping breath of the rowers. At my feet, the boy lay collapsed atop his oar, wracked with sobbing. I looked down at his broad, muscular, scalloped back, livid with welts. The fresh wounds lay atop an accumulation of older scars; this was not the first time the whipmaster had singled him out.

Suddenly I saw nothing, heard nothing; the smell of the place overwhelmed me, as if the sweat of so many close-packed bodies had turned the fetid air to poison. I pushed the messenger aside and hurried up the steps, into the fresh air. Beneath the stars I leaned over the bulwark and emptied my stomach.

Afterward I looked about, disoriented, weak, disgusted. The men on deck were busy taking down the auxiliary sail from the second mast. The water was calm, the shore dark and silent.

Marcus Mummius saw me and approached. He was in high spirits.

"Lost your dinner, eh? It can happen when we rush to full speed and you've got a full belly. I told the owner not to stock such rich provisions. I'd rather throw up a bellyful of bread and water any day than a stomach full of half-chewed flesh and bile."

I wiped my chin. "We outran them, then? The danger's over?"

Mummius shrugged. "In a manner of speaking."

"What do you mean?" I looked toward the stern. The sea behind us was empty. "How many were there? Where did they go?"

"Oh, there were a thousand ships at least, all flying pirate banners. And now they've gone back to Hades, where they belong." He saw the look on my face and laughed. "Phantom pirates," he explained. "Sea spirits."

"What? I don't understand." Men at sea are superstitious, but I could hardly believe that Mummius would half kill the galley slaves to outrun a few sea vapors or a stray whale.

But Mummius was not mad; it was worse than that. "A drill," he finally said, shaking his head and slapping me on the back, as if it were a joke I was too stupid to grasp.

"A drill?"

"Yes! A drill, an exercise. You have to have them every so often, especially on a nonmilitary ship like the *Fury*, to make sure everyone's on his toes. At least that's the way we run things under—" He

began to say a name, then caught himself. "Under my commander," he finished. "Really catches the slaves off their guard when you do it at night!"

"A drill?" I repeated stupidly. "You mean there were no pirates? It was all unnecessary? But the slaves below are run ragged"

"Good!" Mummius said, thrusting his jaw in the air. "The slaves of a Roman master must be always ready, always strong. Or else what good are they?" The words were not his own; he was quoting someone. What manner of man commanded Marcus Mummius and could afford to be so profligate with his human tools?

I looked down at the oars that projected from the *Fury*, suspended motionless above the waves. A moment later the oars stirred and dipped into the waves. The slaves had been given a brief respite and now were at work once again.

I hung my head and took a deep breath of salty air and wished I were back in Rome, asleep in Bethesda's arms.

4

I was awakened by a poke in the ribs. Eco stood over me, gesturing for me to get up.

Sunlight was streaming through the porthole. I rose to my knees on the mattress and looked out to see land nearby with here and there a habitation set among the rocky cliffs. The buildings lower down nearest the water, were ramshackle affairs, humble dwellings pieced together with driftwood festooned with nets and surrounded by little shipyards. The buildings higher up were marked different—sprawling villas with white columns and grapevine trellises.

I stood up to stretch as best I could within the cramped quarters. I splashed my face with water and sucked in a mouthful, swished it to clean my tongue and spat it out the porthole. Eco had already sorted out my better tunic. While I dressed he combed my hair and then played barber. When the ship gave a tiny pitch I held my breath, but he did not nick me once.

Eco fetched bread and apples, and we fed ourselves on the deck, contemplating the view as Marcus Mummius guided the ship into the great bay which Romans have always called the Cup, likening it to a vast bowl of water with villages all about its rim. The ancient Greeks who first colonized the region called it the Bay of Neapolis, I think, after their chief settlement. My sometimes-client Cicero calls it the Bay of Luxury, with a derisive tone of voice; he himself does not own a villa there—yet.

We entered the Cup from the north, skirting the narrows between the Cape of Misenum and the small island of Procida. Directly before us, at the far side of the bay, loomed the larger island of Capri, like a craggy finger pointing skyward. The sun was high, the day was fine and clear without a touch of haze on the water. Between us and the opposite strait that separates Capri from the Promontory of Minerva the water was spangled with the multicolored sails of fishing boats and the bigger sails of the trading ships and ferries that circle the bay, carrying goods and passengers from Surrentum and Pompeii on the south side to Neapolis and Puteoli on the north.

We rounded the headland, and the entire bay opened before us, glittering beneath the sun. At its apex, looming above the little village of Herculaneum, rose Vesuvius. The sight always impresses me. The mountain towers on the horizon like a great pyramid flattened at the top. With its fertile slopes covered by meadows and vineyards, Vesuvius presides over the Cup like a bounteous, benevolent god, an emblem of steadfastness and serenity. For a while, in the early days of the slave revolt, Spartacus and his men took refuge on the higher slopes.

The *Fury* stayed close to the land, circling the Cape of Misenum and then turning her back on Vesuvius to glide majestically into the hidden harbor. The sails were furled; sailors ran about the deck securing ropes and tackles. I pulled Eco out of the way, fearing that without a voice to protect himself he might be stepped on or tangled in the swinging ropes. He gently shrugged my hand from his shoulder and rolled his eyes. *I'm not a boy any longer*, he seemed to be saying, but it was with a boy's excitement that he turned his head this way and that, trying to observe everything at once, craning his neck and skittering about with a look of awe on his face. His eye missed nothing; in the rush and confusion he grabbed my arm and pointed toward the skiff that had pushed off from the docks and was making its way toward the *Fury*.

The boat pulled alongside. Marcus Mummius leaned over the bulwark, shouting a question. After I heard the reply he threw back his head and let out a sigh—whether of relief or regret I could not tell.

He looked up and scowled at my approach. “Nothing was resolved in my absence,” he sighed. “You’ll be needed after all. At least the journey wasn’t wasted.”

“Then you can tell me officially now that my employer is Marcus Crassus?”

Mummius looked at me ruefully. “You think you’re awfully clever, don’t you? I only hope you’ll be half that clever when the need comes. Now off with you—down the ladder!”

“And you?”

“I’ll follow later, after I’ve seen to the ship. For now you’re in the hands of Faustus Fabius. He’ll take you to the villa at Baiae and see to matters there.”

Eco and I descended to the skiff, where a tall redheaded man in a dark blue tunic stood waiting to greet us. His face was young, but I saw the lines of age at the corners of his cat-green eyes; he was probably in his middle thirties, about the same age as Mummius. He clasped my hand, and I saw the flash of a patrician ring on his finger, but a gold ring was hardly necessary to show that he came from an old family. The Fabii are as old as the Cornelii or Aemilii, older than the Claudii. But even without the ring and without the name I would have known him for a patrician. Only a Roman noble of the most venerable ancestry can pull back his shoulders quite so stiffly and hold his chin so rigidly upright—even in a small, rocking boat—without looking either pompous or ridiculous.

“You’re the one they call the Finder?” His voice was smooth and deep. As he spoke he arched one eyebrow, such a typical patrician gesture that I sometimes wonder if the old nobility have an extra muscle in their foreheads for just this purpose.

“Gordianus, from Rome,” I said.

“Good, good. Here, we’d better sit, unless you’re an excellent swimmer.”

“I’m hardly a swimmer at all,” I confessed.

Faustus Fabius nodded. “This is your assistant?”

“My son, Eco.”

“I see. It’s good that you’ve arrived. Gelina will be relieved. For some reason she took it into her head that Mummius might be able to get back by late last night. We all told her that was impossible, even under the very best conditions the ship couldn’t return before this afternoon. But she wouldn’t listen. Before she went to bed she arranged to have messengers descend to the harbor, one every hour, to see if the ship had arrived. The household is in chaos, as you can imagine.”

He saw the blank look on my face. “Ah, but Mummius has told you next to nothing, I suppose. Yet those were his instructions. Never fear, all shall be made clear to you.” He turned his face to the breeze and took a deep breath, letting his unfashionably long hair flutter in the wind like a red mane.

I looked about the harbor. The *Fury* was by far the largest vessel. The rest were small fishing boats and pleasure craft. Misenum has never been a particularly busy port; most of the trade that flows in and out of the Cup is channeled through Puteoli, the busiest port in all Italy. Yet it seemed to me that Misenum was more quiet than it should be, considering its proximity to the luxurious district of Baiae and its famous mineral springs. I said as much to Faustus Fabius.

“So you’ve been here before?” he asked.

“A few times.”

“Well acquainted with trading vessels and business on the Campanian coast, are you?”

I shrugged. “Business has brought me to the Cup now and again over the years. I’m no expert on sea traffic, but am I wrong to say that the harbor appears rather empty?”

He made a slight grimace. “Not wrong at all. Between the pirates at sea and Spartacus inland, trade everywhere in Campania had come to a standstill. Hardly anything moves on the roads or the sea lanes—which makes it all the more amazing that Marcus was willing to send the *Fury* after you.”

“By Marcus you mean Marcus Mummius?”

“Of course not; Mummius doesn’t own a trireme! I mean Marcus Crassus.” Fabius smiled thinly. “Oh, but you weren’t supposed to know that, were you, at least not until you landed? Well, here we are. Hold on for the jolt—these clumsy rowers, you’d think they were trying to ram an enemy vessel.”

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