

2019-01-01

Fortune Favors the Brave

Melissa Anne Nurczynski

University of Texas at El Paso, melissa.nurczynski@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nurczynski, Melissa Anne, "Fortune Favors the Brave" (2019). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 132.
https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd/132

This is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

FORTUNE FAVORS THE BRAVE

MELISSA ANNE NURCZYNSKI

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Tim. Z. Hernandez, M.F.A., Chair

Elizabeth Scheid, M.F.A.

Shanna Gilkeson, M.A

Charles H. Ambler, Ph.D.
Dean of Graduate School

Copyright ©

By

Melissa Nurczynski

2019

FORTUNE FAVORS THE BRAVE

by

MELISSA ANNE NURCZYNSKI, B.A., M.A.

THESIS

Presented to The Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas El Paso

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2019

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	iv
Preface.....	v
Bibliography	xxx
Chapter One	1
Chapter Two.....	11
Chapter Three.....	25
32 BC	25
Chapter Four	29
33 BC	29
Chapter Five.....	38
Chapter Six.....	43
Chapter Seven	47
Chapter Eight	52
Chapter Nine	60
Chapter Ten.....	67
Chapter Eleven.....	75
Chapter Twelve.....	79
Chapter Thirteen	82
Chapter Fourteen.....	85
Chapter Fifteen.....	87
Chapter Sixteen.....	96
Chapter Seventeen	100
Chapter Eighteen.....	104
Chapter Nineteen	110
Vita.....	112

Preface

Serious investigative journalist turned comic novelist Carl Hiassen wrote that “good satire comes from anger. It comes from a sense of injustice, that there are wrongs in the world that need to be fixed.” So, with that quote in mind, I’ve abandoned my ambitions to write serious historical fiction in favor of writing historical fiction with a serious aim. A year ago, I would have told anyone that I intended to write in the vein of Hillary Mantel, obsessively exploring where the personal and political meet and cleaving to accuracy with the fervor of John’s Hopkins graduate student. Instead, as the world around me becomes grimmer and more precarious and as democracy has a real chance of dying, I’ve compulsively begun to write lighter and funnier scenes because escaping from reality is becoming more and more necessary as a coping mechanism.

Instead of writing about the future, I’m writing in the past in the way modern novelists have sometimes written about the future. Whether it’s David Foster Wallace, George Orwell or Kurt Vonnegut, the modern literary novelist has often used science fiction as a means by which satirize authoritarianism, income inequality, and conformity. However, my imagination has never leant itself to the creation of futuristic dystopias. As a travel writer and compulsive traveler, I’ve instead walked in the ruins of temples and palaces and villas, imagining the lives of the inhabitants. The world of ancient Romans, in particular, has captured my imagination. Their lives, unlike those who might have resided in the medieval castles of Europe or the stone domiciles of Macchu Picchu, had a lifestyle that is at least recognizable to a modern American. Given that the Founding Fathers of the United States of America so idolized the Roman Empire that they modeled everything from our representative democracy to the architecture of the capital on the Romans. They even used this to justify enshrining slavery into the Constitution.

Meanwhile, according to a recent *New Yorker* magazine profile and with no sense of irony, Mark Zuckerberg idolizes Augustus Caesar and thinks of himself as a modern version of the authoritarian who put the last nail in the coffin of the Roman Republic. One can just hear the narrator above his head deadpanning “He isn’t” in the style of the sitcom *Arrested Development*. While he isn’t, one wonders what the modern analog of Augustus will look like when he finally surfaces to clean up the mess made by Vladimir Putin and an American media obsessed with turning the most serious matters into a game of profiting from the willfully ignorant. It isn’t just one but all major American news outlets that that decided to treat politics like sports, feeding tribalism, entitlement and misogyny as they fanned the flames of fascism .

I don’t think Donald Trump has an analog in late Republic Rome, however. Even the least competent Roman politicians of the era had intellectual pedigree , political skills and actual victories on which to base their claims to power. I have heard some people compare Trump to Julius Caesar, as they are both demagogues and relentless self-promoters and both had careers that were thought to threaten democratic norms. The similarity ends there, however, as Julius Caesar was a successful general, was known for his principled stances and had immense personal charisma. He was also confident, ruthless and brave. Yet, it is true that his power grab and subsequent assassination further destabilized an already destabilizing Roman Republic.

So, since I have the opportunity to observe twenty-somethings every day in my professional life, I’ve started to wonder what they would do if they were living two millennia ago and if they would at first be far more concerned with their own lives before gradually realizing how much their world has changed.

For example, in my text, one of the protagonists befriends and becomes an ally of Augustus Caesar. He knows the dangers, but he justifies it in his own head:

Sam was pleased to hear this but not at all surprised. Augustus...Gaius...did believe that the gods were with him, and he also believed in the responsibility that came with that.

“Augustus isn’t like Marc Antony was. He’s confident, and he can be ruthless. But he needs no more money or glory. He wants to do right by Rome. Perhaps that’s why the gods favor him so much.”

Characterization

The question nagging at me lately has been, did the Romans recognize their beloved representative democracy collapsing into authoritarianism? Did anyone but the intellectuals care? Could they have done anything? Were they, like people of today, so concerned with their own domestic affairs that they didn’t see what was happening? Would they have felt as powerless as so many of us have?

So, I’ve imagined a group of young people, a generation after Julius Caesar’s death as they navigate a world that feels the same but is somehow different from what they were taught it was. Ancient Rome was a multicultural society, in which people from all corners of the empire assimilated into the highest echelons of society. I’ve tried to reflect that. While there are working class and slave characters, I’ve chosen to focus on the 1% of Ancient Rome. There are several reasons for this, including the fact that it’s uncomfortable to make fun of the poor and oppressed even from a great historical distance. Secondly, I hope that people will want to read the story, and the lifestyle of the Roman rich was far more relatable to a middle class American than that of the poor. Lastly, comedies of manners and matrimony in the style of Jane Austen are best suited to the upper middle class and above.

So, I’ve chosen to write from the point of view of several members of the upper class because even among them, there is room for divergent opinions and point of views. That means

there's also plenty of room for conflict, and conflict is what drives both story and humor. Sabina is an upper-class young woman who is completely stifled by the restrictions placed on her by her society. Domestic matters bore her, but they are all she has to concern herself with at the outset of the story. Sam is an assimilated Gaul, lucky to be one of the few of his people who have survived, and he has thrived. Yet, the people he sees who look like him are far more likely to be slaves than a member of the upper class. He grapples with survivor's guilt. Marcus represents the carefree leisure the one percent. He's not cruel, and he'll even help those less fortunate when can and when it is convenient. Nico is the Greek, cynical and fatalistic, he believes in nothing and everything, and that nothing can be done to change the evil nature of mankind even if he himself is not evil. Lilli is the conformist, who will embrace her domestic role and try and be happy because it is beyond her imagination that any other path would be open to her.

I've chosen a narrative voice and plot structure in the vein of Jane Austen, who wrote about her own times but also viciously satirized the domestic sphere in a tone that often tricked the reader into believing her heart was light. Her narrative voice remained separate from her characters, critical of them when necessary and encouraging of them when appropriate. It's a third person narrator, not entirely unbiased or omniscient. However, I've modernized the tone a bit and made each chapter from the POV of a specific character, and the narrator will only have the perspective of that particular character. Occasionally, when a chapter POV needed to change, I've denoted that with # at the advice of an editor of genre fiction.

This should allow for the reader to understand that the narrator might be unreliable or indicate when a character, like Sam, is empathetic:

Sam glared at Sabina and folded his arms, and she seemed slightly admonished.

"I hope she and the child come through safe. She's a sweet sort, for all that she is a plebe," offered Sabina.

Sam sighed, but he was also somewhat amused. Even when she tried to be kind, somehow Sabina always managed to wrap an insult around the kindness.

Inspirations

In developing the story, I've hit upon a technique that I am sure has been used by other history writers, but I don't know of any. As an avid reader of nonfiction, I've transplanted the personalities of people I admire into my characters. The choices probably same more about myself that I'd care to admit but here we go. Marcus, who has a zest for life and a bad report card despite his intelligence and pedigree has been graced with the personality of the late newspaper editor, Ben Bradlee. In conjunction with the recent film in which Tom Hanks played him, HBO released a delicious documentary that covered most of the man's adult life. He's got charisma enough to win over just about anyone, and in the end, he decides to be more than he needs to be. Marcus isn't Watergate era Bradlee, but rather foreign correspondent era Bradlee, who toiled around Paris in jaunty convertible cars chasing women and looking cool. He's a bad student but a great student of human nature.

Sabina is a young Hillary Clinton, perpetually annoyed at the low bar and privilege the men around her have, and she thus behaves a bit like a trapped animal, though the cage is rather gilded. She just refuses to be happy not getting to use her brain. Nico has the personality and looks of the actor Zachery Quinto, dark haired, witty and not as cynical as he wishes to be. Lily is inspired by the actress and signer Selena Gomez, and Sam is basically my friend Alan, who is also a screenwriter and novelist and I'm not going to give his last name here. The characters are not these people, but whenever I am stuck, I think of they inspirational person and what they

would do and it generally breaks the barrier down. Given the setting and plot, obviously the characters jump off and transform into their own selves when placed in a historical context.

Additionally, I take inspiration where I can get it. My friend and colleague Alan is a screenwriter, and we discussed various screenwriting tropes in detail. Jumping off from those conversations, I promised him to make literal the screenwriting trope “Save the Cat,” which is a metaphor for the early Act I event in which the protagonist goes out of his or her way to rescue someone or something. I’ve had my hero Sam literally fish a kitten out of a fountain.

Accuracy

Another key decision has been to abandon my own obsessive devotion to historical accuracy. That is not to say that I will not endeavor to be historically accurate, but this is not intended to be a work of history or imagine something that might have actually happened. Like the science fiction I have referenced above, my intent is to shed light on the present by setting a story in the past. This means I will endeavor to be accurate, and I will still remain accurate when at all possible. However, if the readability of the story needs to be serviced by deviating from historical accuracy that will take precedence. Generally, this means I will be skipping over and glossing over that which might distract from the story and characters rather than actually getting anything wrong. However, if I need to conflate a historical fact or place a female character where she might not have been in order to advance the story, I’ll do so. I’m not a historian and this story isn’t meant to be history.

A good example of the balance I mean to create can be seen in the way I will name the characters. In my initial drafts, I cleaved to Roman naming conventions. After all, I know what their names would have been so what right do I have to change them? The problem with that is the formal names Romans use confused even the historians of the time and continue to confuse

historians today. This is because they are all very similar. Roman parents named their sons after their fathers and other men in the family or prominent men. On top of that, girls in any given family were all given the same name, after their father and given a number to differentiate themselves. There were four historical men named Marcus during this period, and one of my characters is also called Marcus because it makes perfect sense that he would be named after Mark Anthony. My character Sam would have named his daughter Hadia, which would have also been the name of his two sisters who are also characters. My character Sabina would have the same name as her aunt, who is also a character. Confused yet? The readers in my workshop classes were, and it seriously hindered their enjoyment of the story.

Most historians agree that in conversation, the Romans used nicknames but these were rarely written down. One notable exception to this is Caligula, his name meaning little boots stuck, but it is a historical anomaly that he is referred to by his nickname and not his formal name. Yet, all the same historians agree that he would have absolutely hated his nickname and been furious to know it had been attached to him. Roman naming conventions confuse historians let alone casual readers of a satirical novel.

Also, servants and common people would never have used the nickname of a Patrician and in formal situations the characters would use their formal names. Historians presume people kept this straight from context, but in the context of a work of fiction being read by people in the twenty-first century, it's not fair to expect the reader to understand. So the characters will be referred to, throughout the book, by their nicknames or familiar names. There is a reference or two to the fact that they have formal Roman names, but for clarity's sake, they will be referred to using one name. The main justification for this is if your readers toss aside the book in frustration, nothing is gained.

There is another vestige of historical accuracy that I haven't excised that might strike a reader as convoluted. This is the byzantine (no pun intended) relationships between the Patrician characters. It might seem odd that Sam's mother is on her third husband, picking up Sam's stepsister/wife on the second, but this was inspired by a conversation I had with a historian that didn't think it was likely that Sam's mother would have gone directly from a treasonous Roman-Gaulish husband to a Patrician one, so instead I devised a a stepping stone marriage that made Jacquetta wealthy and more Roman in between. She also said that Sam would be more likely to be adopted into a Roman family if he had a paternal relative who was Roman, and thus I made his grandfather one of the many Romans who married local women of the conquered provinces. Also, the same historian advised me that Sam would not have been welcome to marry a Patrician girl just because his mother had married one, so I invented a stepsister/wife for him. It would have been completely normal for Romans to marry off two unrelated teenagers living under the same roof. The assumption would have been they are probably going to end up in bed, so we might as well make it legal. Also, multiple marriages and divorces were commonplace among the upper classes for reasons ranging from death to political inconvenience to lack of compatibility.

Making Sabina a cousin of Nico's was an invention of pure practicality, giving the characters a connection they could serve as conduits of information about each other. Since the characters don't have Facebook pages, they had to be given reasons to know things about each other. It also spared me the hassle of having to invent relatives of Nico's to serve sounding boards for him. This a a convention also partially inspired by Jane Austen, whose upper class characters all seem to know of each other or at least know someone who knows of each other.

Another historical stumbling block came along when I promised my screenwriter friend I would make a metaphor into a plot point. For fun, I said I would literalize the notion of the hero “saving a cat” to make him or her likable. This is screenwriter shorthand for the moment early in the script where the protagonist does something likable and selfless. In my story, Sam literally fishes a kitten out of one of Rome’s fountains and decides to keep it as a pet. Subsequent research indicated that Romans didn’t often keep cats as pets, preferring trained weasels for rodent control. Yet, rather than change the plot point, I instead made it indicative of Sam’s willingness to go against tradition and an element of his character. It also connects to a subplot about young Roman engaging in Egyptian cultural appropriation, which will not only include cat ownership but cosplay, Sabina’s membership in an Isis cult and Nico idolizing the apparent existence of same-sex marriage in Egypt.

This brings me to another plot point and the presence of queer characters. I use the term queer because they did not define homosexual as an identity the way we do. Same sex relationships between men were commonplace, although they had their own set of rules which would make a relationship between two men of equal age and class taboo. Upper class men were expected to take the masculine role, and it was highly frowned upon if they did not. This will serve as conflict and serve as a metaphor for contemporary homophobia. Less is known about female homosexuality, but the character of Nenet will illustrate that queer women existed.

History as Fantasy

I’ve also been encouraged by readers to embrace the possibility of magical realism in the story. Like now, the characters have various views of religion and magic but I think that audiences embrace magic in fiction and will take my cues from the magical realists rather than

straight up fantasy writers. Also, I have thought a tremendous amount of how to portray the past in a way that is relatable to the future, and like any good science fiction or fantasy writer, I have developed a series of rules so that my world has a consistency so that the illusion that this is in the past is never broken by accident. Yet, I will leave it open to be broken on purpose.

In any case, this is meant to be a commercial piece that also functions as satire and as literature. Pursuant to that fact, I have been researching ways that pop culture has handled historic fiction, and I have done so across genres and across media in order to find a way to evoke the past in a way that is accessible and familiar to a mass audience. Anyone tasked with reading the draft will be grateful to know I've immediately rejected the stiff, artificial formality that one might find in Sir Walter Scott or James Fenimore Cooper, books I read as a child and enjoyed but are not terribly readable from the perspective of a twenty-first-century adult. I say that, with an understanding that both those books were hugely influential from a cultural perspective. *Ivanhoe* created a fictional vision of the Middle Ages that persists to this day and is acted out in Renaissance Fairs across the world. *The Last of the Mohicans* created a romanticism toward Native Americans and First Nation peoples even as the genocidal expansion into their lands continued. The tone, and the fictionalized visions of the past contained in the books appealed at a specific cultural moment. I'm seeking a tone that would, in fact, do something similar, only in the now.

On the other end of the accuracy continuum, I've looked at the exceptional literary novels of Hillary Mantel. She also employs a formal tone most of the time, assigning accents and vernacular that would correspond to her characters from the deep past. Yet, her work never feels stiff or stilted or hackneyed. This feels quite natural in her cycle of novels about Thomas Cromwell, but I am more interested in studying her earlier work *A Place of Greater Safety* which

is written in English but imagines historical figures who spoke French. Again, she assigns appropriate vernacular based on the social position, age and personality of the character that feels authentic even though the words are not historically accurate. She knows she is playing with the past in a way that historians can not and had even cheekily referred to herself as a kind of historical pornographer.

I've tried to take up that through the tone of the interactions between the characters, especially the friendships. In this, I hope the reader will find the relationships both exotic in their setting but familiar in their sensibility. An example would be in the banter between Sabina and Sam:

Sabina put her hands over Sam's, and she shut the cabinet. "You had no right to see that," she snapped.

"You showed me two years ago, Sabina," he breathed in response. "I told you about the druids and you told me about Isis. I can't believe you've forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten. I just didn't think you'd bring it up." She pushed him gently away.

On the other hand, Mantel imagines what it is forbidden for a historian to imagine. I have chosen to keep a distance from historical figures like Augustus, even though I portray him and his actions based on the historical record. One isn't allowed as a historian or journalist to invent scenes or put thoughts into the heads of great men. She writes of great men, something that I have chosen specifically not to do. I've created not quite ordinary characters instead, so maybe imaging their thoughts is less taboo.

However, like Mantel, I plan to let my characters speak fluidly, use contractions and the occasional bit of slang or profanity. Whether or not creating fictional minds is more or less

dangerous or taboo than getting inside the heads of great men, some of whom left copious records of their thoughts, is not something I choose worry about.

Mantel herself has recently come under fire for creating a sense of accuracy so vivid that history students at high tier institutions like Cambridge University have taken to citing her as a historical source, to the chagrin of their professors. In an article on the website *The Conversation*, Mantel argues “Facts are not truth” even as she endeavors to be accurate. The article’s author Michael Durrant argues that neither academic history nor historical fiction can expect perfect accuracy, but they can strive for it within the context of separate agendas:

In Mantel’s view, the past is not something we passively consume, either, but that which we actively “create” in each act of remembrance. That’s not to say, of course, that Mantel is arguing that there are no historical “facts” or that the past didn’t happen. Rather, she reminds us that the evidence we use to give narrative shape to the past is “always partial”, and often “incomplete”. “Facts are not truth”, Mantel argues, but “the record of what’s left on the record.” It is up to the living to interpret, or, indeed, misinterpret, those accounts:

In this respect the writer of historical fiction is not working in direct opposition to the professional historian: both must think creatively about what remains, deploying – especially when faced with gaps and silences in the archive: selection, elision, artful arrangement - literary manoeuvres, more closely associated with novelist Philippa Gregory than with Guy the historian. However, exceptional examples from both fields should, claims Mantel, be “self-questioning” and always willing to undermine their own claims to authenticity.

In fact, as one examines the theories of historical fiction one can find very few deep wells within any one discipline. The subject has been treated by both literary theorists and historians,

and considering historic fiction is not limited to prose or to recorded history, one can also find theories and suggested frameworks from everyone including novelists, screenwriters, poets, writers of popular history, costume designers and archeologists. It is a realm where writers act as historians, as I have, while historians transform themselves into critics. It's a genre which cross pollinates itself and wherein everyone and no one is an expert.

One could even bring in the thoughts of neuroscientists and psychologists to examine the mutability of memory and how eyewitness accounts, long coveted by both journalists and historians, can be notoriously unreliable even in our own day. I've heard pundits, while gasping at some of the stories that circulate freely on Facebook and Redditt, wonder if in the context of Pizzagate, it might be wise to start questioning some of the more lurid stories about Caligula and Nero. Most, after all, agree that Marie Antoinette never said "Let them eat cake", Nero did not fiddle while Rome burned and there was nothing peculiar about Catherine the Great's relationship with her horse.

It's enough to make one give up, but just as I always did as a journalist, I won't let go of the notion that facts exist and they are important, I'll just continue to acknowledge that they are difficult to find and a challenge to interpret even in the best of cases.

Influences

When it comes to influence, despite being an exceptionally better writer and far more literary, Mantel hasn't enjoyed close to the influence of the nineteenth century hacks I mentioned earlier. Yet, she had a personal influence on me as far as teaching me more about the French Revolution that I ever learned in any history class, and she taught me to be fearful of fanatical men and their extremism. Ultimately, Mantel is motivated by understanding the fanatics of today

through the lens of the past. That's another inspiration for me. Yes, I am obsessively interested in the past, but I am interested in how it reflects and amplifies the present cultural moment.

None of those writers wrote about the classical period, and most contemporary writers who write in the period are focused on military campaigns and armor, something that I have no interest in whatsoever. However, one can't even talk about classical fiction without talking about Robert Graves and his masterpieces *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*. He writes of Imperial Rome like it was Brahmin Boston with poison, although thanks to the PBS miniseries, I still hear the emperors talk in upper-crust English accents. It's not a stretch to believe that for all his scholarly bona fides, Graves was influenced by the sword and sandals epics of the silent era and the persistent habit of both Hollywood and theatre of casting British actors as Roman aristocrats and Americans as slaves.

In fact, the sword and sandals epics of the 1950s seemed content to portray Americans as innocents, slaves, and rebellious Christ-like heroes, even as British imperial power waned and American Imperial power has risen. That's why as I construct my characters, I've cast the upper-class Romans as Americans and the Greeks as the British. It's a far better analogy at this point, especially as we watch the dangerous erosion of American democratic norms before our very eyes.

I haven't limited my search for models on how to handle historical accuracy in prose works. As literature influences other media, other media can influence literature. I did rewatch some of the miniseries of *'I, Claudius'*, and the sight of Shakespearean actors hamming it up in togas and sinking their teeth into what amounts to a big, dirty soap opera pretending to be respectable remains a delight. They even cleave to a pretense of accuracy.

However, Sophia Coppola took the opposite approach in her film “Marie Antoinette”. Kristen Dunst uses her American accent, the soundtrack is filled with new wave pop and a memorable shot finds a contemporary athletic shoe among the queen’s many purchases. As such, Coppola is making it clear that the film isn’t about an accurate historical portrait. It’s using the ill-fated queen as a metaphor for youth, excess, consumerism, and pleasure. Yet, something about it works better than say, the wink-wink lunacy of Heath Ledger’s “A Knight’s Tale” with its Queen songs and jousting-as-football metaphors. It’s a fun film, but it doesn’t say anything of substance.

However, I have taken some inspiration from such texts as I populate the text with historical characters, such as when Marcus hires the poet Ovid to write love poetry for him. Historical records indicate Ovid was somewhat of a scoundrel, so making him speak like a contemporary scoundrel felt rather natural:

Ovid smiled. “So, you’ve got to woo a young woman? Is she one of the girls here?”

Marcus gasped, offended. “No, she is the Lady Sabina and she wouldn’t be caught in a place such as this. She’s...”

Ovid grinned. “I hear she’s rich. You’re smarter than you look.”

Marcus glared at him. “I would marry her if she was poor.”

Ovid laughed. “That’s a good start. I can write a line that says as much. The girl will love it.”

Marcus shook his head. “No...maybe yes. Just write something beautiful and impressive that she will believe I wrote.”

Populating the same extreme end are other historical fantasies. Time travel stories on television like “Doctor Who” and “Outlander” solve the problems of history by essentially

ignoring them. Although, the *Outlander* books do have throwaway lines about the heroine's various communication and cultural adjustments, the tv series hardly bothers with such annoyances. Everyone speaks in modern English, appropriately accented to their nationality and class, and dresses in period costumes that might be for sale in an Anthropologie boutique. Doctor Who has science fiction magic to explain the ease of communications and why nobody ever finds the modern clothing of the Doctor and his/her companions strange or offensive.

Then, there is the lunacy of shows like "The Tudors" and the even crazier CW show "Reign", which veer so far into fantasy that they are in fact *fantasies*. "Reign" portrays the fifteenth-century court of France, as a place where women wore loose hair and strapless dresses and men, even princes, didn't often wear shirts and sported gym-sculpted physiques. It presents a fifteen-year-old girl's dream of what the fifteenth century should be, and once you've accepted that as a viewer the fun can be relished. Anyone who has read Mantel's work or seen the PBS adaptation of *Wolf Hall* will recognize how far superior and delicious the fantasy is over the reality. I will maintain, always, that misogyny will keep people from recognizing the brilliance of a young girl imagining and revising the past into a less misogynist, more matriarchal dream world where she gets to have modern independence and live in a castle and rock velvet dresses and shining boots. Yes, Mantel brilliantly shows is the grim reality of the past, but *where is the fun in that?*

The happy medium has been provided much more recently in the film "The Favourite" The film, by the avant-garde director and writer Yorgos Lanthimos tells the story of sexual and political intrigue in the court of Queen Anne, centering around a queer love triangle. The characters all speak in upper-crust English, including Emma Stone, but they also speak profanely and fluidly and sound like living, breathing humans. The illusion of it being a different time

never quite breaks either from too much self-conscious artifice or too much contemporary wording. That suspension of belief is what I aspire to. My characters will curse, will speak in youthful vernacular among themselves, more formerly around their parents, more authoritatively around their servants. They will be as profane as the period they lived in, which was very profane.

Still, the struggle of where to draw the line between fantasy and reality remains ever present, even as the text is becoming close to finished. The author, the historians on whom the author depends, and the readers all will have a say as they process the historical detail through their own imaginations and preconceived ideas. Durrant quotes Canadian historic novelist Guy Gavriel Kay when he says:

When we work with distant history, to a very great degree, we are all guessing.

One can conclude that somewhere between the thousands of dry historical papers that go seldom read and the bonkers fantasies found in genre tv shows, lies the truth of history. I want there to be a significant amount of that truth in my work, but I also want readers to recognize the characters and their situations and emotions.

The Past as an Alien World

Yet, somewhat contradictorily, I also want the world to feel alien and removed from the modern one. Being transported from the modality of one's own life is one of the great pleasures of fiction, and when stories are removed from the everyday life of the reader, sometimes the metaphors and messages become more palatable. Since the inspiration for the entire story comes from my own travels, I have had decided how to transform the ruins I saw into a living, breathing household. That has depended on some practical research, including the use of reference books and internet sites, but more importantly, I've been making use of my membership to the Penn

Museum here in Philadelphia. Frankly, starting at ancient and worn pottery and glassware that sits on a shelf doesn't matter much, but the curators at the Penn Museum have commissioned replicas of many of the objects in the collection, and these objects, which are made to appear new, can be handled and examined. So, this has led to me seeing what Roman dice and bones throwing games actually would have been like to play. I've felt the size of them in my hand. I've put a Roman matron's comb in my own hair, and I've felt the weight and texture of new papyrus in my hand and gotten a sense of what it must have been like for a scribe to write on it, which is a rather stark contrast to looking at the delicate papyri that crumbles in archeologists hands after being buried for a few thousand years. I've tried out writing Latin words on a wax tablet, noting how a person must grip the stylus. This is invaluable for creating a sense of place.

More importantly, the Domus Brutus in my story is very simply a copy of the architectural model of a Roman Domus that is on display in the museum, and the fact that these Domuses often contained retail space that was rented out by their wealthy owners inspired a particular plot point dealing with the fate of an Egyptian slave. The fact that the house had primitive bathroom facilities, a passive cooling system and a courtyard filled with potted plants and mosaics make it easier to imagine living inside it. I have a tendency to recoil in horror when tour guides explain the lifestyles lived by the denizen of medieval castles or Moreover, I have spent a significant amount of time staring at the tiny people inside the model and imagining them as my characters that I think the docents think I'm weird.

That brings me to one of the more problematic elements of the setting. As Roman patricians, the deliciously posh lifestyle of the main characters is made possible by the slaves that serve them. This is obviously morally problematic, but it wouldn't have been for most Roman patricians. Yet, I want my characters to be likable to a modern audience without glossing over

this ugly and, to modern sensibilities, an unacceptable element of the society in which they lived. So, I devised a reason for one of the heroes, Sam, to be skeptical of the institution. He is ethnically Gaulish, and most of his people have been either killed or enslaved in what historians call a genocide. His friends might find his skepticism amusing, but it's there. There will also be slave characters integrated into the story as it moves along. This issue cannot be glossed over any more than it can be glossed over in American history. Many historians assert that slavery did eventually contribute to the destabilization of the Roman economy that led to the fall of the republic, and that will be factored into the book. The Egyptian slave character, Nenet, does get to function as an audience surrogate, pointing out the absurdity of the main characters' selves all while building a good life for herself.

So where does this leave me? Bernard Cornwell, who had written many bestselling historical novels that I haven't read, employs some self-self-deprecation when he says "Hillary Mantel is a Stradavarius, I'm something you get at Walmart." It might be classist to say so, but I don't wish to be popular at Walmart, though I wouldn't object to it if they carried me. I think I'll take a place on one of those tables in the bookstore behind the one where all the bestsellers are. Or something someone downloads on their kindle because they have a credit and end up pleasantly surprised at how smart a fun book is. Or if I must be an object, I'm a really pretty, shiny recreation of a Roman mosaic for sale in a museum gift shop. That would be beautiful.

Tropes

When I think of the most useful ways in which I have learned storytelling, aside from a few of the classes I've taken, particularly the ones that focused on outlines and mechanics, my discovery of a comprehensive wiki of storytelling tropes has been invaluable. I wish I could say that pouring over Harold Bloom or a dog-earned copy of *The Art of Fiction* did the trick, but it

didn't. The website, which is called TVTropes.com, has moved far beyond just the tropes of television and includes literature, film, music, theatre and video games. More importantly, it contains a long, exhaustive list of various storytelling tropes. Without even seeing the website, I used many of them because as the site itself says, you can't tell a story without tropes. My feeling, as I have said many times, is the difference between a trope and a cliché is all in the execution. There are some basic things at work here. I have four protagonists. I have a villain. I have conflict. I have star-crossed love. I have a good dose of screwball comedy. I have two love triangles and two hypotenuses. By hypotenuse, I mean the "spoiler" character that is not destined for the HEA. HEA, another trope, stands for Happily Ever After.

Ancient Rome itself is a trope, and it has plenty of sub-tropes. These include feasts and orgies and chariot races and gladiators and prostitution. Could all of these devolve into clichés? Yes. However, the nature of tropes is such that if you set your story in Ancient Rome and don't include those things the audience rebels. Moreover, I firmly believe people want to see people having fun in lavish houses and at lavish parties. They want to see beautiful people with beautiful bodies enjoying each other's company. Certainly, I have avoided a couple of big tropes, especially ones having to do with the military. One of my characters served in the military when he was very young, but most of them didn't need to as they were born into privilege. This has spared me having to research the exhaustive amount of information on uniforms, swords and spears that exists.

I have killed one of the hypotenuses, which is a trope, but I hope the fact that women did often die in childbirth and often were murdered when they became inconvenient - both things that still happens in patriarchal cultures to this day - makes it not so convenient. Reading the

website, I did remember rolling my eyes when Matthew's fiancé suddenly contracted tuberculosis on *Downton Abbey*, so I am aware that this could play differently than I intend.

In any case, thinking about trope and identifying them has been helpful in crafting a narrative and hopefully making that narrative feel original, if not be original.

Strengths and Weaknesses

When I talk about weaknesses, I'm not talking about my lack of proofreading skills or inability to properly format or aversion to certain grammatical rules. I'll deal with that somehow. If this bizarre little work in progress were ever to be made publishable, I would need to look at the strengths and weaknesses of my own prose, the plotting and the characterization. Reading over the manuscript, the peculiarity of the tone shift jumps out at me, as do the cliches, which I suppose are just tropes that have failed to disguise themselves with quality. Or is it more accurate to say that cliches are just tropes that have failed to disguise themselves with quality? However, I do see some strengths as well.

So having read the story more than once now, I think I'm at my best when writing friendship scenes. Just having characters, who have no attraction to each other and who like each other, talking about some situation they have found themselves in seems to suit me. These are the moments when the story seems to come alive, and I can see the characters. For example, I'm fond of the scene where the young men get drunk as one of them is about to become a father. This is right in line with the culture of the time, and the humor in it hopefully helps soften the fact that Sam is not behaving in a modern way at this particular moment. I'm also fond of Marcus's problem solving abilities in general, as the idea of a non-book smart character who is competent in other ways is very appealing.

I'm also amused at the idea of people pretending to be in love, which is a staple of screwball comedy, and Sam and Sabina getting to do it later in the story also amuses me. I don't want it to come off in a hackneyed way, such as on a sitcom where it is obvious that they are pretending. No, they are good at fooling people into thinking they are a romantic couple, but the humor comes from the reader being privy to their actual thoughts. This is an advantage of a novel over a more visual medium.

I also like Sam and Sabina's friendship. They are well-matched, and probably would be pretty happy together in a Will & Grace sort of way, and that is even suggested to them toward the end of the book. But this is a Romance, and a Screwball Romance on top of that. There's always a better guy for the girl than the one she loves, it's just in this case there's a clear reason why Marcus is the better, if more risky and exasperating option. Spoiler: I've actually started a sequel in which Sabina and Marcus are nauseatingly happy and stay that way through the whole book, much to everyone around them's chagrin.

I also enjoyed writing what I call the "cultural appropriation" scene, with the main four characters cosplaying as Egyptians and having a wonderful time doing it. No, this isn't me saying "let today's kids be racist" but rather me saying that the impulse to fetishize other cultures as exotic long predates our own culture. There's plenty of archeological evidence that this kind of thing went on in early Imperial Rome, and it's apparent at the Penn Museum's collection of Egyptian trinkets found at Roman archeological sites. I think for my characters it shows their privilege and their openness simultaneously. As much as I like my characters, they are privileged, clueless idiots in the same way Virginia Woolf and her friends were when they race cosplayed. Thankfully, I have Nenet to roll her eyes at them and remind the audience that her

culture is far older than theirs, for all that it has been reduced to a series of Hollywood tropes in our own. Yes, she's a side character but she's an important one.

Another strength: some interesting minor characters have surfaced. Originally, I had no characterization in mind for Sam's stepfather beyond rich guy with hot wife. I just gradually realized it would be interesting if he was every stereotype of a Patrician Roman, passionate, spoiled, corrupt, hedonistic, selfish and blunt. He's not evil, he's just a product of his own privilege and the person who can tell truths. I also have become fond of Nico's lover, the chariot racer Daniel. I didn't want to make him African because African slaves are a cliched image and I already had Nenet, so I thought of making him Persian except that Persian slaves were rare. So, I went with someone from the steps and gave him a Hebrew name because names from the steps are difficult. I know, I spent a half an hour googling tribal names from the period. Nenet originally was just there to lead the young men to an Egyptian alley where they could buy beer, but then she turned out to be a great vehicle for illustrating not only the precarious situation many Egyptians found themselves after the death of Cleopatra. She's also interesting in that earns her freedom by making herself useful to her master, something that was more common in this time and place than in early America. It also gives me a way to portray the way a skilled freed slave could find work and even economic opportunity.

On the other end of the spectrum is Sabina's little brother. In order to give Sabina even a modicum of freedom and agency, I had to make her an orphan and her guardian be her younger brother. At first, I just saw him as she would, a ridiculous annoyance but it was fun to give him a few moments of being the voice of sanity towards the end.

I've never been one to write about myself, but like any good novelist I've made the heroine a bit like myself, but to my not very intense surprise, I found myself finding it more

interesting to write other characters. Sam comes the most easily to me, while Marcus is the most fun. It's not that I don't like writing Sabina or Nico, but the former is too like me to feel comfortable and the latter is too unlike me. I'm entirely sure why Sam comes the most easily, except for the fact that he's a great observer and an outsider and I think I relate to that. There's probably too many POV chapters for Sam, but there you go.

Although I think I plotted the screwball, mixed up partner plot that drives the conclusion of the book pretty well, I think writing romance is very difficult. How do you create chemistry on a page? How do you deal with tropes that are thousands of years old and make them seem at the very least, not hackneyed? Setting the story in an unfamiliar time and place helps, as does having a sense of who the characters are. Truth be told, it was easier for me to ask my gay friends what they would find romantic and or funny and just incorporate their suggestions for Nico and Sam, but with the straight romance it was a little harder because it's all been done before so many times. Why would Sabina choose someone like Marcus? I set on the idea that he loves her because she's smart not despite of it, and that feels like a good choice. I'm just not as confident about it as I am with the friendships. So, I have set about a bit of a cheat in that Marcus looks up some actual romantic poetry and plagiarizes it. Sabina recognizes the source, but she's touched that he would try and take credit for something so beautiful and apply it to her. So, I guess they are made for each other? We'll see. I thought *Twilight* was trash but people seemed to like it. Does the logic follow that nobody will like this.

Another element that concerns me is how short some of the chapters are and how long others are. I know some authors are fine with multiple points of view in different chapters, but that irritates me because it often creates a lack of balance. Even though the text is all third person, each chapter is from the point of view of a single character. I think that is a good

choice, but the problem is that has led to some overly short chapters and other chapters that have been split into point-of-view sections. I don't know if this would fly with any sort of commercial editor. The good thing is, however, editors do like to fix things like that.

Conclusions

Overall, writing this thesis has illuminated a number of theoretical problems posed by historical fiction, and in fact, fiction in general. I've had to find a tone that is familiar to the reader but still feels exotic and of a different time and place. I've had to create a moral point of view that is accessible and relatable to a contemporary reader without glossing over the grim realities of the past. I've had to create a world which hovers between historical reality and the fantasy that modern people might have of the past, all with the aim of elucidating contemporary moral and social problems. It's been daunting but rewarding.

Bibliography

Latin Dictionary Online Translation LEXILOGOS >>,
www.lexilogos.com/english/latin_dictionary.htm.

Adkins, Lesley, and Roy Adkins. *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome*. Facts On File, 2004.

Austen, Jane. *The Complete Works of Jane Austen*. Magpie Books, 1993.

Badian, E., et al. "Ancient Rome." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 22 Mar. 2018, www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome.

Beard, Mary. *SPQR: a History of Ancient Rome*. Profile Books, 2015.
Bowman, David A., et al. *Pompeii*. Bohemian Club, 1989.

"Bernard Cornwell: Why Historical Novelists Have a Duty Not to Get Things Wrong." *Stuff*,
www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/books/97657066/bernard-cornwell-why-historical-novelists-have-a-duty-not-to-get-things-wrong.

Durrant, Michael. "Facts Are Not Truth': Hilary Mantel Goes on the Record about Historical Fiction." *The Conversation*, The Conversation, 19 Sept. 2018, theconversation.com/facts-are-not-truth-hilary-mantel-goes-on-the-record-about-historical-fiction-79359.

Graves, Robert. *I, Claudius: from the Autobiography of Tiberius Claudius, Emperor of the Romans, Born 10 B.C. Murdered and Deified A.D. 54*. Collectors Library, 2013.

Grey, Tim. "How 'The Favourite' Director and Crew Defied Period Conventions." *Variety*, 5 Dec. 2018.

James, William, and Bruce W. Wilshire. *William James: the Essential Writings*. State University of New York Press, 1984.

Llywelyn, Morgan. *Druids*. Ballantine Books, 2006.

LODGE, DAVID. *CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE NOVEL*. VINTAGE, 2018.

Shakespeare, William, et al. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Carson & Simpson, 1891.
Sienkiewicz, Henryk, and Maria Cieszewska. *Quo Vadis?: Roman*. Libretto, 2016.

Taylor, Brian. *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire: 753 BC to 476 AD ; a Chronology*. Spellmount, 2008.

"The Penn Museum." *Penn Museum*, www.penn.museum/.

Young, Samantha. "Based on a True Story: Contemporary Historical Fiction and Historiographical Theory." *Otherness: Essays and Studies*, Aug. 2011, www.otherness.dk/fileadmin/www.othernessandthearts.org/Publications/Journal_Otherness/Otherness__Essays_and_Studies_2.1/1._Samantha_Young.pdf.

Chapter One

26 BC

Marcus Laberius stumbled from the most elegant brothel that could be found adjacent to the harbor in Ostia. That is to say, the establishment wasn't terribly elegant but it had served its purpose. The sun was reaching its Zenith, and Marcus squinted and shaded his tired eyes with his hands. Taller than most young men by a good measure but with square-jawed and elegant Roman features, the Marcus would have been the picture of a well-born young man had his toga not been impossibly wrinkled and dirty and his hair askew.

Marcus didn't bother trying to smooth out his toga. They were impractical and annoying garments on a good day, and Marcus avoided wearing them. The night before, however, they had been required at dinner. He was staying with one of his father's most trusted men, who had a house not far away. Marcus could have returned there, but was in no mood to put on a charming front. Besides, it would have been rude to return to his host with his clothes in such a state.

Marcus stopped at a small shop that peddled wine out of vats and bread out of an oven that one could take away. A rotund woman behind the counter cheerfully explained the various selections and then served him his choices.

"Ah, you've got some Northern blood, I see," said the woman when she saw his eyes.

"Very pretty indeed."

Marcus smiled. His mother had been from the Gallic city of Nardo, and he had inherited her light eyes, which were somewhat rare this far south. Everyone he met seemed to comment on them.

He took his wine and bread and thanked the woman before leaving the shop and finding a harbor side bench to sit down upon. The port was busy, with ships of all sizes from all corners of the empire crowding the harbor.

The great thing about Ostia was that this wine was as good, if not better than that which was served in his host's home. Harbor cities always offered the finest in food and wine, especially seafood. Oysters fresh dug from the sea tasted so much better than the ones served in Rome.

Once he had finished eating and not knowing what else to do with himself, Marcus walked along the harbor toward the edge of the city. He soon reached a section of the harbor where smaller ships, usually carrying passengers as opposed to goods, could dock.

He looked around. He recognized ships of Greek and Egyptian design, as well as one he assumed was Nubian but wasn't sure.

His father, Maximus Hadius, had insisted Marcus tour multiple cities and inspect their family warehouses. Marcus had no expertise in this area, but his father had sent slaves with knowledge of shipping and accounting with him. They were doing the work, while Marcus tried to be charming to the various merchants and traders.

Normally, his half-brother Eolus would have made this trip, and Marcus wondered why he had been sent. He suspected that his father and brother wanted him out of town for a reason. He also believed that reason had something to do with the fact that he had witnessed his brother flirting with the Lady Sabina at Jupiter's Temple. The image, burned in his mind, made Marcus simmer with anger. Eolus most certainly did not love her, but Marcus suspected that Maximus and Eolus loved the idea of her dowry, which was rumored to be substantial.

Marcus, on the other hand, loved Sabina. Fate, however, had been cruel. For Marcus was not a legitimate Hadius. His mother had been Maximus Hadius's mistress and had been married to another citizen, one Lucius Laberius. Her husband had been dead for two years at the time of Marcus's birth, and his family had decided that Marcus should be exposed after his mother had died in childbirth. But Maximus Hadius had loved Marcus's mother and sent men to rescue the doomed baby that Marcus had been. Maximus had raised Marcus raised a Hadius, but he technically wasn't one. He existed in a strange nether zone. He was a citizen, born of two patricians, but he was an outcast. Marcus's father may have loved him, but he had never adopted him, never taken steps to legitimize him.

Because of this, Sabina's elite family saw him as unworthy. Sabina did, too, but Marcus only saw that as a challenge worth overcoming. Marcus didn't believe that an accident of his birth should prevent him from having anything he wanted, which included a great fortune, an exceptional house and an even more exceptional wife.

Marcus knew he had to move fast to make his fortune if he were to ever make himself worthy of Sabina, and he knew he needed to start paying more attention to the trading aspect of his family's labyrinthian business dealings. He thought he might even pay his father's slaves to teach him what they knew, so he could engage in his own trading. Of course, he would have to hide this from his brother and father, who intended Marcus to remain subservient and grateful for whatever scraps of privilege they tossed him.

Marcus made a mental note to write Eolus's son, Sam, and ask if he had seen anything untoward between Eolus and the Lady Sabina. Sam, who happened to be Sabina's cousin, and Marcus were nearly of age and had been chums since they were boys. He trusted Sam would tell

him the truth. Marcus only hoped he could stall his greedy brother for long enough to prevent Eolus's divorce and remarriage.

Very suddenly, the sound of panicked screaming and wailing brought Marcus out of his thoughts. A small Egyptian ship, its deck overflowing with passengers, had caught fire and a plume of black smoke billowed from its aft. Men, women and children leapt from all sides, and some of the unfortunate people were already swimming toward the dock and the shore.

Marcus looked around for some way to help, and he noticed a small boy, some distance away from the other passengers, bobbing in the eerie way that meant drowning. Without hesitation, Marcus jumped into the water and swam toward the child. The chilly water shocked his whole body, and his toga became heavy. As he approached the boy, he grabbed him around the chest, making sure the child's head was above water.

"Don't panic," said Marcus as much to himself as to the boy, though he didn't think the boy understood Latin.

Marcus looked around, and he realized the boat was sinking and he needed to get the boy clear. There also didn't appear to be steps or a ladder that could get them up the harbor wall. Marcus felt the only choice was to swim toward the beach across the harbor, and so he began swimming in that direction.

"It's a long way to shore, but we can make it," he said in Latin. He didn't know a word of Egyptian and his Greek was middling, and he suddenly regretted skipping out on so many sessions with his tutors as a boy.

Marcus could swim, but his soaked toga and sandals seemed to become heavier and heavier with every stroke. He started moving slowly to conserve his strength, but he feared he

would soon sink and take the boy with him. Panic started to set in, and Marcus inhaled deeply in an attempt to stave it off. He had no intention of dying in a botched attempt at heroism.

Marcus looked around, and he noticed a small boat approaching them, and a young man with a nasty blacked eye reached out an oar.

"Grab hold," said the man in Greek-accented Latin.

Marcus kept hold of the half-drowned boy with one hand and grabbed the oar with the other. The Greek pulled him toward the boat. The Greek had two strong-looking male slaves with him, and one of the slaves plucked the Egyptian boy from the water and plopped him into the boat. Marcus attempted to climb in but his heavy clothes made it difficult. The Greek reached out a hand, and Marcus took it. With a strong grip, the stranger assisted Marcus in climbing over the side and into the boat.

"Always remove your toga and sandals before attempting to swim, friend," said the Greek.

Marcus grinned at the young man. "I only wish I had had the luxury of a boat," he replied.

"You do now," replied the Greek. "There's dozens of others that could use our help."

The Greek and his slaves began steering the craft toward other victims, and Marcus took off his soaked toga and twisted it into a rope that he could toss to that needed assistance. He thought of removing his tunic, but he didn't want to scandalize the Egyptians, whom he had heard were prudish, by rescuing them while naked.

The Greek spoke to the little boy in Egyptian, and that seemed to calm him somewhat. The boy pointed at a young girl still treading in the water. Marcus realized it must be his sister, and he threw his toga-rope and used it to pull the girl on to the boat. The two children cried and

embraced and pointed to others that needed help. Soon the Greek's small craft was filled with wet Egyptians as they headed toward one of the docks.

The Egyptians said prayers as they piled onto the dock, and they also thanked the young men. A few of them even kissed Marcus and the Greek, and then the dock. Marcus looked over at the young Greek, who wore a fine Athenian style tunic and realized that his rescuer was a patrician. The Greek was staring at Marcus.

"You're a Hadius," said the Greek, pointing at the fascinus pendant hanging around Marcus's neck. The phallic emblem was in the shape of a Phoenix, the symbol of Marcus's blood family. By law, Marcus carried the name of his mother's husband, a man who had died two years prior to Marcus's birth.

"By blood if not by law," replied Marcus. "I'm grateful that my father allows me to wear his family's emblem but my name is Marcus Laberius. You may call me Marcus."

"Glad to meet you Marcus," he replied. "My friends call me Nico."

Marcus noticed that the young man didn't give his surname, which was highly curious, especially in light of the fact that he had recognized the Hadius family emblem. Yet, Marcus also noticed that Nico appeared completely unfazed by Marcus's confession about his parentage.

"I can see that you are Athenian, but where have they come from?" said Marcus gesturing to the Egyptians who were walking toward the city. "Most slaves wear finer clothes."

The young man sighed as he and Marcus both climbed out of the boat. "They've come from Alexandria, no doubt. Most of the Nile grain is sent here rather than to feed the people who grow it. So many face starvation that they book whatever shoddy passage they can, hoping to find work at the heart of the empire."

Marcus shook his head. With so many slaves, free laborers often went hungry in Rome. "Someone should tell Augustus."

The young Greek stared at Marcus. "It was by his order that little was left for the people of Egypt. He's still bitter that they sided with his enemies."

Marcus was about to argue, but he kept politely silent. Politics weren't a polite subject to broach with a new friend, and the Greek had obviously fallen for some anti-Augustan propaganda. The Augustus Marcus knew was a fair man, and he was one who would be wise enough to see that people would follow their queen no matter what. He also would have known that the best way to win the Egyptians to his cause was to see them well fed.

"Well," said the young Greek, "good day to you. I've delayed too long already."

Marcus was so lost in thoughts, he almost let his new friend walk away without thanking him.

"On the contrary, friend, I think you haven't delayed enough. There's a tavern not far from here that can provide you with all manner of delays."

The Greek didn't look very amused, but then he smiled. "I did work up a thirst." He turned to his slaves and told them to tend to the boat and that he would meet them back on the ship.

"You never told me your name," said Marcus, who gathered this might have been a deliberate oversight.

"As I said, you can call me Nico," he replied, not giving his family name. While this was unusual, it was not unheard of for those on discrete business.

"You can call me Marcus."

They walked toward the tavern Marcus had in mind, but Nico pointed to a bread and wine merchant. “I’ve heard Ostia’s food stands are the best. It’s also a beautiful afternoon. Why spend it indoors?”

Marcus nodded. “A fine idea.” Soon they obtained wine from a small stall and sat on a nearby table that overlooked the water. It was mostly merchants and sailors who patronized the place, so space was quickly made for two patrician young men, even if one had only begun to dry off from his unplanned swim.

“What’s Athens like?” asked Marcus as they sat down. “I’ve heard it’s very different from Rome.”

Nico smiled. “I’ll be able to tell you in a few days. I’m headed to Rome.”

This news delighted Marcus, as it meant he might see his new friend again soon and might even learn what business was taking him to Rome. Yet, Marcus knew not to press. If Nico didn’t want to reveal details, Marcus knew he should respect that despite his curiosity. Discretion, after all, was the better part of valor.

“So,” said Nico, “does the object of your affections have a name?”

Marcus blinked. “What do you mean?”

Nico shrugged. “You’re unmarried, no doubt because of the scandal of your birth, and I assume you dove into the sea this afternoon to impress upon a young woman that you are a man of such courage and fortitude that she would be a fool not to overlook the awkward circumstances of your birth. Or perhaps her father was watching?”

Marcus shook his head and took a big drink from his goblet. “It was perhaps myself I was convincing. The lady’s father is dead, and her brother is nowhere in sight. Although, if he were, I doubt my foolishness would have impressed him. Titus Sabinus is nothing if not a practical lad.”

Nico, who Marcus noticed was not drinking nearly as much, looked at him strangely. “You’re ambitious, friend. They’re one of Rome’s oldest families. I have been told her dowry is so large she won’t be able to wear all the jewelry at once and will require slaves to carry the several chests filled with gold and jewels that will come with her.”

Marcus drank down his glass and called for the stand owner to refill it. “The two slaves that she’ll bring with her probably couldn’t lift a broach on their own, though those two old crones are wily. I’m sure I’ll come up with some use for them.”

Nico was about to say something, but Marcus interrupted him.

“But I would marry her without a dowry at all...if she were a freedwoman. If she had nothing.”

“That’s quite a testament to your devotion. She’s that beautiful?”

Marcus grinned and drank down more of his wine. “She’s beautiful. Yes. But she’s more than beautiful. She’s got fire in her. Most well-bred Roman girls are terrible company. They always agree with you. They always flatter you. That is, if they say anything at all. Sabina is different. She never misses a chance to insult me.”

“No wonder you love her.”

Marcus placed a hand on Nico’s shoulder. “You are being sarcastic, I know it. My nephew Sam...my brother adopted him but he’s a blood cousin to her...you know how we Patricians are all related...”

“More than you know, friend. It’s dizzying how many interconnections there are. I hear Sabinus the Elder had a sister who married into a Greek family. Had four sons.”

“I’m sure he did...in fact...”

“That means she’s got cousins in Greece.”

“Maybe I’ll take her there. I’ve heard Athens is beautiful. You said so just a few moments ago, when I was sober.”

“It is. Tell me, do you think her family would approve of her marrying a drunkard? Her brother will, I assume, be rightfully cautious in choosing a husband. Her cousins likely would protect her as well.”

“I’d never get drunk if she was my wife. She’s too...she’s the type of girl who’d keep a man’s attention where it need be.”

Nico smiled. “She sounds like a rare creature.”

“Yes,” said Marcus. “Yes. Yes. And if my brother touches her I’ll kill him.”

“I thought your brother was married.”

“He is. As of now.”

Marcus looked to see if Nico was shocked by this bit of slightly scandalous information. He didn’t seem shocked but rather amused. Marcus found this a good sign. The Greek wasn’t a prude. That would make him a more amusing companion.

Chapter Two

As Sammius Hadius walked on the familiar cobblestone streets of Rome's Palatine Hill, he paid little mind to the stares he got from those who were not permanent residents of the neighborhood. Those who lived in this upper-class part of the city didn't find the sight of light-haired and sky-eyed Sam, in his fine clothing, to be an unusual sight. They knew who he was and more importantly, who had adopted him.

It was the wealthiest neighborhood in Rome, so it was a rather pleasant walk compared to other parts of the rough-and-tumble city, but there were still crowds, noise and sometimes unpleasant altercations. The smell of cooking fires mixed with incense offerings to household gods and the livestock that was being led through the streets. Much had changed since Sam had been a boy in Gaul, but he found comfort in the fact that the sounds and smells and sights of Rome had not changed much since he first arrived in the city so many years ago. People from all parts of the Empire went about their business, buying, selling and bargaining. Most people had the olive skin and dark hair that was typically Roman, but others had skin as dark and smooth as the night sky and some were nearly as pale as Sam. Clothing marked people as Egyptian, Persian, Greek, Nubian and Judean, and Sam had heard at least three languages that weren't Latin that very afternoon.

Sam would have liked to linger among the people, listening and watching, but he had a message to deliver. The message's contents preoccupied him so much, he almost didn't notice a pair of bandits had cornered an old woman in a tattered dress. As she cowered, the two men were searching her for coins.

"Why don't you do bother someone who has something worth stealing?" said Sam as he approached. He had a small sword with him, which he unsheathed. However, he knew it was

unlikely the sword was necessary. His patrician tunic and the pendants that hung around his neck were far more powerful than any weapon.

The two men, both who were probably from the country given their rough garb, stepped back from the woman. The taller of the two handed the woman back her coins.

“Is that all they took?” asked Sam.

“I had a ring,” she said.

The second man glared at Sam and the woman, but he returned the ring.

“Now,” said Sam, “I don’t want to see you anywhere on Palatine Hill again, and I strongly suggest you return all the way to whatever miserable village spat you out, if they’ll have you.”

The men turned and ran, and Sam felt a heavy sensation of relief. He almost never went anywhere with guards if it was light out and he staying on the hill, and he wasn’t at all confident he could have taken the two men by himself.

"You must be the son of Apollo, so handsome are you," said the old woman in a creaky voice. "I thank you for your kindness."

Startled, he saw that the woman's face was kind and her words were sincere, so he resisted the impulse to chide her for impertinence.

"You flatter me," he said. "If I were the son of Apollo, I would tell him to grace you with good fortune. Alas, I'm a mere mortal."

Sam pointed at the fascinus around his neck. The phallic pendant, which was fashioned of expensive bronze in the shape of a phoenix, was thought to ward off evil spirits and make young men strong.

The old woman's eyes widened, and she suddenly looked fearful. "It's not Apollo that you're born of, but Pluto, eh?"

"Only by legal degree, not blood," replied Sam, hoping this would comfort the suddenly shaken woman.

His adopted family, whose emblem was the Phoenix, claimed to be descended from the god of the underworld himself. They were so ruthless in their business dealings and that even the most skeptical of observers wondered if the tale was true. This woman, whoever she was, knew the stories.

"Ah," she replied, less scared. "Your mother is the Gaulish Prosperina, then." She also pointed to a second charm Sam wore next to his facinus, which was a druidic triskelion. Sam wore it next to his Roman pendant as a way of proclaiming he was unashamed of his Gaulish blood, although very few Romans ever recognized it.

The fact that this old woman did recognize the symbol and knew who Sam was caught his attention. "Yes, my mother is Jacquetta of Gaul," he replied slowly.

The old woman smiled. "You inherited her beauty, that's for sure. I only wonder, will you find it a blessing? Or will you find it a curse, as your mother has?"

Sam locked eyes with the woman. "My mother resides in one of the finest houses on this hill," he replied softly.

The old woman nodded. "And a fine prison it is. There's far worse ways to be cursed."

Sam paused for a moment, then his mouth curled into a smile. He reached into his purse and pulled out a coin and held it out to the woman. To his surprise, she waved it away.

"I don't need favors from the Hadius family," she replied, "but I do wish you good fortune. May Apollo's grace shine on you. Failing that, maybe the Gaulish spirits will."

The woman tottered away, and Sam watched her disappear around a corner, unsure of what to make of the encounter. He must have waited a full minute before continuing on his way.

Because the weather was pleasant, the streets were unusually packed so Sam cut through a side street and down an alley. He tossed the coin he would have given the old woman at a beggar before emerging in front of a large, well-kept house. He knocked on the door, and soon a young slave boy answered the door.

Sam asked to see the Lady Sabina, and he was led inside to a library off the courtyard where his cousin waited for him, as eager as a lion pacing in its cage before a meal. She stood tall, her dark hair piled atop her head in an elaborate sweep and elegant bracelets on both her wrists. She had been a pretty girl and now as a young woman she was a great beauty, but her sharp, hawk-like features were often accentuated by a frown. Yet, when she saw Sam, she smiled ever so slightly.

When they had first met, years ago, she had seemed ill-tempered, but over the years Sam had come to enjoy her quick wit and keen mind. She had also been the only person who had provided any competition for him during their studies with a shared tutor. If Sam wanted to argue over philosophy, Sabina was his only choice among his childhood companions. His best friend Marcus had never paid attention to his studies, and Sam's wife, Lillianna, had worked hard but did not excel.

Sabina had also embraced Sam as her cousin, when others might not have done so. Sam's father by blood had been half Roman, and Sam and Sabina shared a grandfather, albeit from different grandmothers.

"You're looking beautiful, Sabina," said Sam cheerfully. "Is that dress dyed Indian cotton? Perhaps you can tell me where your slaves obtained the material? I think my wife would look beautiful in it."

"Do you have a message?" she said breathlessly, ignoring his questions.

Sam pulled a small scroll from his leather bag and handed it to her. "I haven't a clue what it says. I'd rather not know," he lied.

It *was* a lie. A huge lie, in fact.

The missive was a love letter. A long, passionate and loving letter filled with glowing praise and even lines of terrible poetry.

None of that was unusual or scandalous. The scandalous part was that it was from Sam's adopted father, Eolus. The fact that Sam's mother Jacquetta had born Eolus three children and had been a dutiful wife for years did not seem to factor into either Sabina or Eolus's thinking. Rich men divorced their wives all the time. Eolus had also appeared to have forgotten he had once been so in love with Jacquetta that he had pursued her relentlessly and was suspected to have murdered her second husband.

Sabina knew Sam knew what was in the letter. He knew she knew, but they both knew not to acknowledge it. She shot him a look that indicated all of that as she eagerly opened the scroll and sat down to read it.

Sam wasn't sure what to make of this situation between his stepfather and his cousin. For many years, Sam had wanted nothing more than to see his mother freed from the Hadius family and her marriage to Eolus. Sam's preference was for Eolus to die some sort of agonizing and humiliating death, but him finding another wife would do. Sabina had a far better pedigree than

Sam's mother, and she was younger and richer. It made sense that Eolus might be looking to replace his mother with a better model, now that the passion had worn off.

Of course, nothing inappropriate had happened between Eolus and Sabina. Sabina, like all respectable Roman girls, would never be allowed to be alone with a man, even Sam. As they talked, a pair of elderly female slaves called Kaia and Aya sat in the corner to make sure Sam behaved himself.

This was not necessary, as Sam had never understood why so many of the men he knew, including Marcus, were so enamored of his cousin. She always seemed in such a foul mood. He liked her and was often entertained by her, but he much preferred his even-tempered Lilli as a wife.

Furthermore, even though he should be happy about the prospect of Eolus divorcing his mother, Sam had mixed feelings. His mother had first resisted Eolus Sam all her might, but once she acquiesced to him, she had developed affection for him. Being replaced by a younger, more appropriate woman would be very hurtful to her. Sam thought his mother had already dealt with enough hurt in her life, and if Eolus divorced her then his mother would become Sam's responsibility.

Sam definitely couldn't afford to take care of his mother and his wife. On top of that, Eolus would retain custody of Sam's younger siblings and that separation would probably kill his mother, or at the very least make her miserable company.

"Has Titus talked recently about finding you a husband?" he asked Sabina. Since their parents were dead, Sabina's younger brother would have to approve of any choice of husband for his sister. Sam couldn't imagine that ever happening for either Eolus or poor unfortunate Marcus.

Sabina barely acknowledged Sam's question. Instead, she tucked the scroll into a fold in her dress. "I need to compose a letter back. It won't take long."

She kept her word. Sam didn't know precisely what she wrote, but it was a mere two lines on a wax tablet, which she wrapped up and handed to him.

"See to it that he gets this," said Sabina. "and show no one else."

Sam accepted the message, and he was about to ask if she had heard from Marcus, but he knew better. Mentioning Marcus always put her in an even worse mood than normal. It was like reminding a horse about a particularly persistent fly.

"How's Lilli?" she asked. "She must look like a cow."

Sam turned away. "I wouldn't know. You can see her, but as her husband, I can't, not until the child is born. It's an absurd custom if you ask me."

Sabina rolled her eyes and then puffed up her cheeks and spread her arms wide. "It's probably so you don't have to see her looking like a cow."

Sam glared at Sabina and folded his arms, and she seemed slightly admonished.

"I hope she and the child come through safe. She's a sweet sort, for all that she is a plebe," offered Sabina.

Sam sighed, but he was also somewhat amused. Even when she tried to be kind, somehow Sabina always managed to wrap an insult around the kindness.

"Thank you, cousin. I'm glad you wish us well, and I know it must be hard for you to be as yet unmarried. I'm sure Titus will find someone worthy of you. It's just that there are so few men in Rome worthy of you...and most of them are already married."

Sabina rolled her eyes again, but as they walked to the door, she placed a hand on his arm. "I will make an offering to Minerva asking that Lilli and the child come through safe."

This time, there was no backhanded insult in her words. She meant them. Sabina's own mother had died giving birth to Titus, so she knew well the risks. Sam also knew that while his cousin outwardly showed devotion to Minerva, her loyalty might have been to another, more exotic, goddess.

He walked over to a small cabinet and opened it. Inside was a diminutive idol in the shape of Isis and several vessels for incense. Sabina had for years hinted at her devotion to the Egyptian goddess, whose cult was a popular open secret among patrician young women.

Sabina put her hands over Sam's, and she shut the cabinet. "You had no right to see that," she snapped.

"You showed me two years ago, Sabina," he breathed in response. "I told you about the druids and you told me about Isis. I can't believe you've forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten. I just didn't think you'd bring it up." She pushed him gently away.

"You really think Isis is going to deliver Eolus into your clutches? He married my mother against all tradition and against his father's wishes. He had her husband placed on a purge list to make it happen. It's some goddess that can accomplish that."

Sabina glared. "It will take a goddess to break a witch's spell."

Sam rolled his eyes. His mother, as far as he knew, had practiced no sinister Druidic magic to win Eolus. Lust didn't need the help of priests, as far as he knew. He was going to argue, but he felt sorry for Sabina. Eolus was probably just toying with her to amuse himself.

Sam leaned over and kissed his cousin on the cheek. "Whatever Gods will listen, I will ask them to send you the right husband. One that will love you and appreciate your spirit."

Sabina kissed him back. "You mean that? Even if it means your own mother will be tossed out into the street?"

Sam laughed. "She'll hardly be in the streets, and I've prayed for her to be rid of him since the day they met. So, it behooves me to keep being your messenger. Enjoy the rest of your day, cousin."

With that, Sam headed out the door and into the streets, which had become less crowded as the end of the day approached. The Hadius Domus was only a few blocks away, and so Sam was soon back inside his own home, where he found Eolus waiting in the atrium.

"Sam, my dear boy," purred his adopted father. "You wouldn't perhaps have a message for me."

Sam handed Sabina's message to his mother's imposing husband. Still handsome and youthful, there were a few more lines on his face than when he had married Sam's mother and a touch of grey in his hair. Still, he was tall and very Roman looking with an elegant jawline. He seemed rather captivated by Sabina's short message.

Sam sighed. He sometimes wondered if Eolus was the only man in Rome that would put up with Sabina's ill temper, after all Sam's mother had been similarly difficult in her youth.

It was strange. The idea of Eolus finding happiness away from Sam's mother rather than dying appealed to Sam in an odd way. Sam still resented him, but his hate had lessened over the years.

Sam didn't want to think what his life would have been had Eolus not decided to adopt him. Not that Eolus had kept him around out of affection for Sam.

Jacquetta married Eolus on one condition. Adopt my son and treat him as our own.

Eolus had agreed.

Most of the Gaulish children he had known when he was small were not nearly so lucky. Most of them did not have Roman blood or wealth or connections. Many of them had been from families foolish enough to rebel against Roman rule.

Sam called for a slave to bring him wine, and then took a goblet and walked out onto a terrace that overlooked the city. Sam sipped on his wine and took in the view, with all the Domuses and apartment buildings peppering the hills. He could even see Octavian's fine Domus, though Octavian went by the name Augustus now. Since defeating Marc Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, Augustus was Emperor in all but name.

Perhaps it was because of the ongoing flirtation between Eolus and Sabina, but Sam was preoccupied with the thought of what his life would have been if Eolus had never fallen in love with his mother. He wasn't naive. His real father would still be dead. His mother's second husband wouldn't have been able to protect them. Lillius Centenus had been Marc Antony's man and those who had been loyal to him were all dead.

Sam knew he should be grateful for his life. It was better this way, but he couldn't stand the idea of living here any longer. He wanted to leave Rome, go somewhere cleaner and better, where he and his wife could raise their children in peace. He longed for the fresh air, fertile farmland and blue water of Gaul.

His wife, Lilliana, had been the daughter of Jacquetta's second husband. Sam also didn't want to think what would have happened to orphaned Lilli had his mother not shown a rare burst of compassion and arranged for her and Sam's betrothal. Jacquetta may not have been terribly fond of Lilli, but she hadn't wanted to abandon her to a terrible fate either.

All Lilli wanted was to be the lady of her own fine house and raise well-mannered and happy Roman children. Both of them had only seen seventeen summers, but Sam refused to

spend the rest of their days as pawns of his adopted family. He had to gain his own resources, whatever it took.

He might not be able to have a house this luxurious, but he was sure Eolus would help him some way, if only to get him out of the way and to keep him an ally.

As though he had read the nature of Sam's thoughts, Eolus strode out on the terrace, goblet in hand.

"Your mother will one day bankrupt me for all the silk she buys. She insists your child be swaddled in it when he arrives."

Sam took a deep breath and stared into his wine. "I'm not so sure it will be a he. I had a dream that it was a girl."

Eolus laughed, and he clapped Sam on the shoulder. "You and your Gaulish witchcraft. Let's hope it fails you this time."

Sam took a gulp of his wine, and he was silent. The Romans were so disrespectful of women. It made little sense. In Gaul, girls were not considered second best. Had the Romans not come, his mother would have been a queen.

"Well," sighed Sam, "we should hear soon enough. The midwife said it shouldn't be more than a couple more weeks. If the gods be pleased, both the child and Lilli will come through safe."

Sam wished he could go see Lilli. He knew the tradition said he couldn't see her until after the birth, but it was both worrisome and frustrating. Yet, his mother had lived through three pregnancies, including twins. She was strong and well, and he only hoped Lilli would be the same.

"Do you want to talk about something equally important? Something that might provide a useful distraction to a young man like yourself?"

Sam glanced over at Eolus. "What would that be?"

"Trade, Sam," said Eolus. "We don't maintain all the households we do based on our legacy. Trade keeps us afloat, and we need trading partners. We're looking to make a deal with a Greek family - one that works with us Romans rather than against us. They are sending a representative to Rome to negotiate an exclusive trading contract. They'll send us high-quality olive oil, we'll have the exclusive rights to it. If the deal works as it should, your children will want for nothing, as mine won't."

Sam glanced out over the cityscape. Torches were starting to be lit as the sun had disappeared behind the hills and twilight had come to the city. Whether it was a fine Domus like the one in which he stood or a squalid hovel or one of the many apartment buildings that peppered the seven hills, they all used olive oil. It was necessary for cooking, for cleaning, for grooming, for bathing. It fueled the lamps that lit the night. Yet, the stuff that was being shipped from Spain was of low quality and the subject of much grumbling. Having a contract from a high-quality Greek producer would make Eolus, one of the wealthiest men in Rome, even wealthier.

"Do you think they will agree to the deal? The Greek producers must be powerful, and there's other Roman families that might court them. Augustus might find a bidding war politically useful." Sam glanced at Eolus. Sam may not have been Roman by birth, but he understood city politics well enough that he knew Augustus liked to pit the most powerful families against each other. It was far better that they fight amongst themselves than unite against him.

"He may well," said Eolus smoothly, "but I already sent a man to Athens to do research. They are sending their youngest son as their representative. He's not much older than you, and he volunteered for the mission out of a sense of adventure. That's why I'm bringing it up. I want you to show him all the adventures our fair city has to offer. Take him anywhere he wants to go, win his loyalty."

"Why not ask Marcus?" inquired Sam skeptically. "This seems like a task to which he'd be more suited."

This was the truth. Although Marcus and he had been close since the day Sam had arrived in Rome, Sam was far more inclined to spend his evenings reading or composing poetry than carousing in taverns. He would be the ideal person to show a young Greek all the pleasures Rome had to offer.

Sam wasn't sure what Eolus, who looked very amused, was thinking, but he had a guess. Many Romans considered Sam favored by fortune in that he had a large, impressive phallus, which was something Romans thought brought good luck to a household. Sam suspected this may have been what Eolus, who could be as superstitious as any Roman, was trying not to mention. Sam looked his father in the eye as if to dare him to bring that particular issue up.

Eolus thankfully demurred. "For one thing, Marcus is still traveling to the outer cities checking on our business interests," replied Eolus carefully, "and he will be gone for at least another few weeks. Besides, from what little I've heard of the young Greek, I suspect you two will get along far better. He's more of an epicurean than a hedonist."

Sam was skeptical, but he accepted this. It was possible that Eolus was just looking for a way to give Sam the means to start his own life, out of Eolus's house.

Sam looked down into his empty goblet. Marcus would of course taken the Greek to the most expensive and exclusive brothels, offer him slave girls, orgies. Rome offered pleasures that those from the outer territories could only dream about. Sam wasn't much for such indulgences, and he was devoted to Lilli, but he supposed he could tour the young man around in exchange for a cut of the profits. He could certainly take the visitor to the Circus Maximus to see the chariot races and to a gladiatorial match. Yet, Sam still had a feeling that he was missing something.

"By the way," said Eolus casually, "I have another message to be delivered to the Domus Quinticas."

Sam looked down at the letter in Eolus's hand, and he noticed it was again addressed to Sabina Quinticus, not Titus Sabinus Quinticus. If Eolus was concerned that Sam wondered why his mother's husband was engaged in ongoing correspondence with the unmarried virgin Sabina, he didn't show it.

"Yet another task that would be more suited for Marcus," said Sam softly.

Eolus snickered. "Sabina wouldn't receive Marcus if her life depended on it. She finds his infatuation with her amusing, always has."

Sam took the letter and looked down at it. At least he had something very interesting to report to Augustus next time he wrote him.

Chapter Three

32 BC

#

Marcus stared down at the wax tablet in which he was supposed to write a translation of some important Greek speech by some important Greek man who had likely spent his life doing nothing but think and bather about nothing. Marcus could read Greek well enough but he wasn't inclined to write some kind of elegant translation.

He glanced over at Sam, who was helping his betrothed, Lilliana, with her assignment. Sam was always so kind and patient with the little plebe that he was going to marry. Unfortunately, since Lilli had joined their lessons, Sam little time to do Marcus's work for him.

They weren't even at the Domus Hadius, where Marcus could easily slip off to his room and entertain himself with a game of dice. The Greek slave was owned by the Sabinian family, and they had invited Sam to be part of their children's lessons. Marcus's father had arranged for him to join the lessons, and now Lilli had come as well. Strange that Nicodemus Sabinus had bought an expensive Greek slave when his son wasn't yet old enough for these lessons. Only the man's daughter was, although Marcus wondered why they would waste such an education on a girl. Sabina should have been learning to weave or dance or something.

The girl was sitting toward the end of the same table as Marcus. Her dark hair fell over her face but she appeared to be concentrating on her translation. Marcus slid on the bench they shared until he was next to them.

"Be careful," she said. "If you get too close one of my women will give you a beating."

Marcus glanced over to the old slave woman charged with protecting Sabina's virtue. If there was any truth to the legends of an evil eye, the slave was giving it to Marcus. Marcus then looked down at Sabina's tablet. Her translation looked perfect, and she had only been working on it a few minutes.

"By the Gods," said Marcus, "you have the mind of a boy. Better than most. Better than mine."

She looked up at him, and she smiled. Then she looked down at his tablet.

"Yours is a mess. Marcus...you've had tutors longer than me. There's no reason..." She paused. "There's no reason to be ashamed. You're the tallest and strongest of all the boys. And I hear you are the best at dice and brigands."

Marcus shook his head.

"If translation were a game, I'd maybe do better."

Sabina looked up at the tutor, who was working with Sam and Lilli.

"I'll help you," she said. "Just distract the old Greek while I fix yours."

Marcus nodded, and he walked over and began peppering the tutor with questions about Greek vocabulary and grammar. Marcus didn't even know if his questions made sense, and Sam looked both puzzled and amused. Soon Sabina beckoned him back and slipped him back his tablet.

"Thank you," said Marcus.

She grinned. "Will you promise to show me how to throw dice?"

Marcus nodded. "It would be my pleasure."

#

Marcus marched into the warehouse, one of many owned by his family, and demanded to see the crusty old man who managed the place. The manager, who could only see out of one eye and used a walking stick, wobbled out from behind some barrels, clearly worried. An unexpected visit from his boss's son was probably the last thing the man had expected or wanted. His hands shook slightly but he looked Marcus straight in the eye, with his one good eye.

“A group of Egyptians arrived today. Their ship caught fire.”

The manager stared. “You're the news reader now, sir?”

Marcus shook his head. “No...no. It's not worth it to buy slaves for the new shipments. The increase in the number of crates and barrels that will be arriving is short term. It's best to hire help. Father says so. I think the Egyptians will work cheap.”

The manager shook his head. “There's men around these docks that are veterans of the campaign against Antony. They hate Egyptians and won't much care for anyone who hires them.”

Marcus sighed. “They won't much care for Egyptians sleeping on the piers either.” Marcus folded his arms. “It's not a request. My father heard from someone in the Senate that Egyptian laborers work harder than slaves and are cheaper for short term jobs. We can even use some of the empty space to lodge them, so we can pay them even less.”

This, of course, was not true at all. Maximus Hadius wouldn't have thought twice about buying cheap slaves, working them to near death and then selling them off to finish their miserable lives in the mines or fields. Marcus never understood the practice, which seemed to him both cruel and wasteful.

“Your brother won't approve,” said the manager.

“When has my brother ever approved of anything you’ve done? At least you’ll have my approval.”

The manager ran his fingers through his hair and took a deep, long breath. Marcus knew and he knew that Eolus was impossible to please and never did favors for the men under their father’s patronage. If this man had any wisdom, he would know that pleasing Marcus was a far more self-advancing course of action. “All right, sir. All right. We’ll try your plan. Where are these Egyptians?”

Marcus really only knew the general direction they had gone, but he told the man which way they had walked, and the manager promised to send a few of his assistants.

Chapter Four

33 BC

His mother's wedding feast had been going on for what seemed like hours, with more food of more different varieties than Sam had ever seen, and he had never been impoverished back home in Gaul. Thrush and pheasant, oysters and fish, grapes and pomegranates and many delicacies that young Sam could not name. His mother Jacquetta lounged at the high table with the man that had just become her third husband, and her golden hair had been fashioned into an elaborate Roman nodus hairstyle, pushed up and curled around her face. She wore a veil that draped over her shoulders but had been pushed back to reveal her face post-ceremony. Sam had heard many of the guests remark on her stunning beauty, and many of them said they understood why Eolus would marry a Northern barbarian. Her eyes, they said, reflected the sky.

As she spoke to the various patricians who wished her well, she smiled and laughed and appeared to be a happy bride. Sam, on the other hand, knew his mother better than anyone and knew that the laughter and joy she projected was a facade that threatened to crumble at any moment. In her eyes, he saw coldness and anger. If he had been older, he would have killed her husband to protect her, and perhaps someday he would, but for the moment he knew he had to bide his time.

Unlike his mother, Sam wasn't good at pretending all was well so he was grateful when his mother and the slaves she had charged with looking after him all lost sight of him. The boy seized this chance and slipped away, through the cramped alleyways and back into the grand Domus that had recently become his home. He had nowhere else to go, though he would have run all the way home to Gaul if he could have.

He made his way past the winemaking shop that rented space in the front of the house, through the ornate main door and back to the courtyard where he crawled under a table and hid. He thought only slaves would be at the house, and with his patrician clothing, even the ones to whom he had not yet been introduced knew to let him be. Yet, he soon realized he was not the only patrician who had skipped out of the feast.

A group of well-dressed men came into the courtyard, and they began playing at dice. Sam watched as they laughed, placed bets and called for wine. In the group, one young man stood out as the leader.

Sam didn't think there was anything particularly special about this mysterious young man's appearance. He was of average stature, handsome and appeared every way a Roman, though his hair was light enough to suggest some northerner in his bloodline. He did, however, carry himself with the chilling authority of a schoolmaster.

Not only did the others treat him with deference; Sam also observed that this young man was the only one of the group placing bets based on mathematics as opposed to arrogance or optimism.

"Marcus Laberius, this was a splendid idea," said the young man to the youngest member of his group. "They'll hardly miss us at the feast."

"I'm always glad to serve you, Consul," replied the young Marcus as they played their game.

Sam realized that the older man had to be Gaius Octavian, heir to Julius Caesar and one of the rulers of Rome.

Sam watched for a long while, not making a sound. Finally, Octavian turned to his companions.

"I have need of privacy," he said abruptly. "You must all leave, except you Marcus. Wait for me in the atrium."

All the young men obeyed, without question or hesitation, although some of them gave puzzled glances to each other as they hurried out of the courtyard.

Marcus couldn't have been more than two or three years older than Sam, but he was already taller than Octavian, and he stood there awkwardly Octavian strode over to the table beneath which Sam hid.

"You may come out now," he said.

Sam crawled out from under the table and stood up. He greeted Octavian formally, in Latin, in a manner which befitted Octavian's station. He explained that his Gallic name had been Latinized, but that everyone close to him called him Sam.

Octavian gave him a gracious nod in reply. "That is what I enjoy seeing. A Roman boy raised in the provinces who knows how to behave like a Roman." As he spoke, he stared at Sam with what appeared to be a mixture of delight and fascination.

"Thank you, sir," replied Sam. "I've patrician Roman blood in my veins through my grandfather, Lucius Sabinus, and my mother is a Gaulish princess."

"He's my nephew," said Marcus to Octavian. "My brother just adopted him."

"That means I'll expect you to look after him, Marcus," replied Octavian. "Will you do that?"

Marcus stared at Sam, and Sam saw that he, like Sam, had eyes like the sky. Sam wondered if that meant he could trust Marcus. He wasn't sure.

"I'll keep him out of trouble," said Marcus, who then smiled in a way that indicated that he was not telling the truth.

Octavian rolled his eyes. "Perhaps you should go join the others."

"Yes, sir," said Marcus, who ran off but not before winking at Sam.

"It's probably you who will have to look after Marcus," said Octavian gravely. "The boy enjoys life far too much for his own good."

"I will, sir," replied Sam. "I've never had an uncle. At least, not one that I've known. I was raised in Gaul."

Octavian nodded in acknowledgment, "I've seen your mother, and I know well why your new father was so captivated. Moreover, you speak Latin as well as any of us. No wonder Eolus agreed to your mother's price and adopted you. I hope you aren't insulted that I skipped out on the feast."

Sam shook his head. "I'm not there, either, sir."

Octavian looked Sam in the eyes, and he smiled just slightly. "I'll bet you understand better than anyone why I chose not to attend. Just don't tell Eolus I was here. I told him I had pressing business. I didn't tell him betting tablets were the business."

Sam smiled softly. "I won't tell, sir."

"Good lad," replied Octavian. "Now, tell me, did you enjoy watching the dice game? We would have allowed you to join had you asked."

Sam tried to keep his face neutral, but his lips curled into a smile.

"What amuses you, boy?" asked Octavian.

Sam looked up at Octavian, and he decided it was best to tell him the truth whatever the consequences. "I wouldn't play dice against you, sir. The others were playing as though it was a game based on luck. Your bets indicated you calculating possibilities in your head. No matter how fate threw the dice, your method would see to it that you won."

Octavian appeared impressed. "You observed that from under this table?"

Sam nodded. "It's not cheating, sir. You're just playing the game the way a wise man would."

Octavian shook his head. "I know it's not cheating, but...well, never mind that. Perhaps you would like to put that keen mind to work for me, but it would have to be our secret. Can I trust you?"

Sam looked up at Octavian. Sam's true father's father may have been a Roman, but Sam looked like Northern Barbarian and his true father had died fighting against the Romans. That Octavian trusted him meant a great deal to Sam.

"Of course, sir," replied Sam.

"Good," said Octavian, who reached into his purse and pulled out a wax tablet with an emblem on it. "Write me your observations of your new family on this. I will send a man to fetch it in two weeks time. Your report will be quite helpful, but tell no one and see to it that no one discovers what you are doing."

Sam took the wax tablet and tucked it in his own purse. "You can trust me, Consul."

Octavian squinted slightly, and he nodded. "Now," said Octavian, "I think we should cease worrying about weddings and other such matters and enjoy this afternoon. In fact, I insist on it. Have you been to the Circus Maximus?"

Sam shook his head. "No, sir."

"Well, then," said Octavian as he turned toward the Atrium. "We shall remedy that immediately."

Sam followed Octavian out of the courtyard, no longer feeling alone, but also feeling like he had just placed a very risky bet

#

Sam may not have been a Hadius by blood but being Gaulish had a few advantages of its own. He thought about this as he stared up at the pristine but relatively modest house, where Augustus lived with his family. Certainly, it was a fine residence, but Augustus was so wealthy he could have had a palace the size of Palatine Hill itself. That wasn't Augustus's way, though, as Sam well knew. Augustus was emperor in all but name, but everyone knew better than to ever name him as such. He was the humble first citizen, protector of the people.

Adjacent to the house was a shining and newly constructed Temple of Apollo, which Augustus had built after lightning had struck a section of his home. The temple's sanctuary was accessible from inside Augustus's home, which likely served both the emperor and the god well.

Sam ascended the stairs to the front door of the house, and the guards smiled at him and waved him through. He may have gone through the front, but he headed straight for the kitchens. His eyes scanned the room where multiple slaves, some Gaulish, some Germanic, some Egyptian, some Roman, all worked over various pots and fires. Augustus's household had at least three hundred people, so there was more than just Augustus and Livia and their children to feed.

Sam finally noticed a familiar figure bending over and seasoning a large pot of something. Sam strode over, and he inhaled the steam that wafted from the stew. It smelled wonderful, of the herbs that grew wild in Gaul.

"It's the first citizen's favorite," said Katurīx, a young Gallic man with shaggy red hair and a scar across his cheek. Kat spoke in their native Gallic tongue, and Sam relished the opportunity to practice the language his mother would have had him forget.

Yet, it was always bittersweet to see Kat. Sam's old friend seemed well, and of all the places he could have been transported, this was not the worst. Still, Kat and Sam had been equals

as boys. Now, Sam was an aristocrat and Kat was a slave. The fates could be capricious and cruel that way.

"The more he loves your cooking, the better off you'll be," said Sam, who was always surprised at the ease of which the Gallic tongue came back to him.

Kat grinned. "You always were good at stating the obvious, Sam," said Kat. "I miss the old country, of course, but I'm content. How are you? How is your beautiful Lilli?"

"In confinement," said Sam proudly. "May the gods be with us, and she and the child will come through safe."

Kat grinned warmly. "I'm sure all will be well. I wish you both the most happiness, but what brings you here?"

Sam reached into his satchel and pulled out a small sack. He opened it and gestured for Kat to take a whiff.

"By the gods," he said. "That's the finest pepper I've ever smelled, and we get the best here. At least, I thought we did."

Sam nodded. "Eolus has a private store. In his cups, he brags that it's better quality than Augustus's, straight from a Hindu trader."

Kat closed the bag and pushed it back toward Sam. "Do you think you can get an audience with Augustus directly? Give it to him personally?"

Sam nodded. "I've got a message about Maximus that I can only deliver in person."

"He's been in good spirits lately," replied Kat, "but any message about that old friend might dampen his mood."

Sam hoped it wouldn't dampen it too much, and Augustus would protect him against the machinations of other families and perhaps his own. He left Kat and the kitchens and headed into the foyer and told the secretary there that he had an appointment.

He was led into a small room, where Augustus sat at a desk and was writing something. Sam admired this. Augustus could employ a thousand scribes, but he wrote most of his correspondence himself.

Sam greeted him, formally in the Roman style, and Augustus smiled and got up. He kissed both Sam's cheeks, then briefly kissed Sam's lips. There were few men outside Augustus's family that he greeted this way, and Sam was honored to be one of them. The most powerful man in the world was in his thirties, but he still looked youthful and comely, with sandy hair and bright, intelligent eyes.

"It's good to see you, Sam," he said earnestly, "not that I don't enjoy your missives. You have a great turn of phrase. I can practically picture the sour looks between Eolus and Maximus and Marcus based on your letters. They aren't just helpful, they quite entertain me."

Sam grinned. He'd been writing Augustus vivid letters since the day they had first met at the Circus Maximus shortly after Sam arrived in Rome. Augustus sometimes joked that Sam should write an epic poem about what he had seen in the Hadius household.

"I've also brought you this," said Sam, holding out the bag of pepper.

Augustus took the bag and inhaled. "This is the stuff Eolus thinks is superior to mine? Well, he may be right. So, I thank you. If you can find the location of the Hindu trader, do let me know. Now, what can I do for you?"

Sam smirked, and then he explained about the olive oil and the trade negotiations.

Augustus looked annoyed, especially about the brothels and the idea that Sam had been asked to engage in immoral pursuits in service of gaining the contract.

"A young married man like yourself shouldn't be asked to compromise yourself," said Augustus.

Sam leaned over. "You've seen my wife, sir," he said. "She's the finest Rome has to offer. I need nothing else in a woman."

This pleased Augustus greatly, as Sam knew it would. Augustus frowned on the hedonism that reigned back in the days of Marc Antony. His vision was of a Rome where strong morality kept man's baser instincts in check. While Sam had heard rumors that Augustus and his wife threw private bacchanalias for the elite of Roman society, Sam didn't believe those stories.

"Well," replied Augustus, "I care not what some Greek does here in Rome, so you give him what he wants. You make him happy without sullyng yourself, and then from my end, I'm going to make certain that none of the other families interfere. Just remember, I'm doing it for you, not Eolus or your mother or the gods forbid, Maximus. I'll see to it you and your family be compensated. Your children, Sam, will be the future of Rome."

With that, Augustus hugged Sam, and Sam smiled to himself. Maximus and Eolus had no idea that Sam was close with Augustus, and the thought filled him with happiness. He also briefly remembered his real father, and he hoped he would understand. If Gaul couldn't be free, then at least Gauls could have a place in the great empire.

Chapter Five

Sabina looked down at the gushing letter from an aunt whom she had never met. Yes, Aunt Sabina the Elder and her father had been close as children, and her father had spent the last weeks of his life in the company of the Greek family she had married into, but Sabina knew her not.

She did know Aunt Sabina had borne four sons, and only the youngest was not yet married. This fact had been mentioned multiple times in Sabina's letter, as well as many details about this cousin who was a stranger to her. He had been named after her father and he was apparently so handsome that all the young women in Athens were hoping for his hand.

To punctuate this fact, Aunt Sabina had included a small gold mosaic image of Nicodemus. Dark-haired and dark-eyed, he was the very image of a perfect Greek Adonis. Of course, the mosaic artist likely wanted to please his patrons, so even if Nico were not quite so handsome, the artist would have motivation to make him appear so. Sabina sighed. She had her sights on a bigger prize. Unlike her unfortunate aunt, Sabina had no desire to be exiled to a province that had seen its best days centuries ago.

Sabina read Greek perfectly, and she knew her philosophers and she knew her dramatists. She never missed a production of Sophocles, and she could quote Plato and Aristotle.

However, she wanted to marry a Roman. She didn't just want to marry just any Roman either, she wanted to marry the scion of the Hadius family. Eolus was handsome, rich and he had become tired of the Gaulish barbarian that he had married in a fit of lust. Sabina would, of course, have preferred Augustus, but he was devoted to Livia. Eolus was the next best thing even though the Hadius family openly engaged in trade. Once she married Eolus, she would put a stop

that kind of vulgar profiteering. Her wealth would allow Eolus to focus on land ownership, as was proper.

There was a soft knock at the door, and Sabina sighed.

"Come in, Titus," she said.

The door flew open, and her little brother - not yet fifteen - peered in at her.

"You had a letter from Aunt Sabina, as I did," he said.

Sabina smiled and nodded. Her brother was nothing if not good at stating the obvious.

"She said she sent you a portrait," continued Titus. "He's on his way to Rome. Do you find him fair?"

Sabina rolled her eyes. "Rome is filled with fair men. It's men who are fair that are rare, here and in Greece I'll wager."

Titus blinked, and she could observe him straining to understand the double meaning in her remark. Titus liked things simple, and he saw the world in simple terms as well.

"I will greet our cousin," said Sabina, "but I do not wish to live in a backwater. I will not marry someone who will not live in Rome."

Titus came into the room, as carefully as if he walked on hot stones.

"You make assumptions, sister. Perhaps he's looking for a wife to anchor him here. Lavina tells me he has had a falling out with his brother for some reason or another. She didn't specify the reason."

Sabina, who had had been told the same information by their aunt, sat down at the desk and pulled out a wax tablet and a stylus. If her cousin had fallen out with his brother, perhaps they had something in common. Perhaps, she thought, it might be a good idea to move all the way to Greece to be free of Titus and his banality.

She took a deep breath, and she smiled prettily at her brother. "I am looking forward to meeting our cousin," she said.

"Me, too," said Titus. "He was with father the last few weeks before Actium. He might be able to tell us what his mood was before the end."

These words struck at Sabina's heart. Suddenly, she no longer felt anger or resistance but rather sadness. Her father had always been so kind to her, never scolding her for talking back or not casting her eyes down. He encouraged her and flattered not only her looks but her keen mind, and he told her beautiful stories. It still hurt her that he was gone, even though he had died nobly in battle and brought honor to her house.

His absence sometimes made her wish he was a coward. He would have found her a worthy husband by now, and she wouldn't be trapped in a house with Titus.

#

Nicodemus Marinos looked down at his reflection in the pond where he and his slaves and guards had set up camp for the night. He was hoping the bruising on his face would heal before he reached Rome. The problem with having none of his brothers or any of his friends on this trip with him was that no one was honest. All the slaves and guards told him the bruising was gone, but it wasn't. What the Hadius bastard must have thought of this, Nico didn't know.

Nico felt around his eye and cheek. He could handle himself in a fair fight, but his brother Alex wasn't prone to fairness. The blows had come without warning, and Alex hit hard. For the first few days of his journey, Nico couldn't see out of his left eye.

"I'm glad you're going to Rome, so you'll be out of my sight," Alex had spat at him.
"You're a disgrace."

Nico didn't regret what he had done, and that had infuriated Alex even more. It was just that Heron, the young slave that Nico had freed, was special. All the young man wanted was to go and live free with his woman.

Nico would have preferred if Heron had wanted to stay and continued to serve him as he had done since they were boys, but it wasn't to be. Nico couldn't keep someone who had meant something to him in his household against his will. Nico wasn't naive either, he knew that the world was cruel, but Heron was brave and worked so hard and had desired his freedom. Nico loved him, so he had to let him go.

Nico had given Heron enough money to free himself, after Heron had spent all the money he had saved to free the girl who had become his wife. It was Nico's money, and Alex shouldn't have cared so much. Except, Alex knew that Nico cared for Heron and that was what his brother could not abide.

There were rules that governed relationships with slaves and relationships between men, and Nico had violated them.

He had brought shame to his house, and as punishment he was being sent to Rome on a merciless errand, negotiating a trade pact with a family that was known to be treacherous even by Roman standards. When Nico had left, even his parents had seemed eager to see him leave, although his mother had hugged him and told him that it would mean the world if he could negotiate a favorable deal. The meaning was clear. If he could squeeze as much gold as he could from the Hadius family, then he would be back in their good graces.

So, Nico had to do that. Although, Nico wasn't sure rescuing a bastard Hadius from drowning was a good omen or a bad omen. He felt a little bad that he had avoided telling Marcus

his identity and that they would probably meet again soon, but he wasn't ready to face that family. He wanted to give himself time to settle in before the negotiations began.

Nico glanced up, and he saw the old man who had been assigned as his body servant. No more pretty young men would be allowed to serve him, not after Heron. His party of eleven slaves including old men and women.

"It'll be healed by the time we reach Rome, sir," he said, finally being honest. "I promise."

Nico nodded. The old man was kind, and he probably was just as happy to be away from Alexander as Nico was.

"I suppose it won't be more than a day or so," said Nico. "We didn't lose much time helping those unfortunate Egyptians."

"You did a good thing, sir. You should write your mother and tell her. She'll be proud."

Nico didn't respond.

"Are you excited?" asked the old man. "I went with your father to Rome years ago, when Julius Caesar still lived. You'll find much to recommend the city. Some of the fairest girls you'll ever see, from both respectable and not respectable families, depending on which pleasures you seek."

Nico smiled to himself, and he resolved that he would keep his mind on business. He had no doubt that Rome would offer all sorts of pleasures, but pleasure is what had gotten him in trouble with his family in the first place.

Chapter Six

Sam was seated on a pillow in Augustus's office, and the room was filled with a most pleasant smoke. Augustus had offered him an opium pipe, and Sam had taken it willingly. Sam rarely indulged in smoking it, but he knew better than to turn down Augustus.

"I remember when you were a boy," said Augustus sleepily. "You seemed so angry at Eolus and Maximus, not scared but angry. You were a small, golden-haired thing, peeking around screens and listening to what the adults said and plotting your revenge."

"You were barely an adult yourself, sir," replied Sam taking a drag from the pipe. "I suppose that's why you took such a liking to me."

Augustus took the pipe back from Sam and laughed. "You were much like I was at that age. You knew who to trust and who not to trust. I knew I could make you my ally, and I did. I've never regretted it."

Sam sighed and leaned back on the pillows. Augustus was such a handsome man, so full of charisma. He wasn't at all cold and harsh like so many people said. "If the Gods be willing, you never will, sir."

Augustus laughed. "You know, when we are alone," he replied, "I wish you would call me Gaius. Nobody calls me by my real name anymore, not even my sister or Agrippa."

Sam yawned. "I'm honored, Gaius. I truly am."

Augustus put an arm around Sam, and he put his head on Sam's shoulder. Sam nestled closer to him, knowing that Augustus would never ask for more than this. Sam considered that lucky, even though he thought Augustus was most handsome. Becoming Augustus's lover would be dangerous for a multitude of reasons, not the least of which was the wrath of his wife Livia.

In fact, Sam was fairly certain Augustus was faithful to his wife. When Sam was a boy, Augustus had promised Sam that he would care for him, and he wouldn't ask anything ugly of him. Sam had later heard the rumors about what Julius Caesar had asked of his nephew, and he understood. Augustus would never do to Sam what was done to him. Sam loved him all the more for it.

Eventually, the two got up and walked into the courtyard, where a lovely young girl ran into Augustus's arms.

"Julia," he said warmly, "you must remember my friend Sammius."

The girl smiled, and she reached up to touch Sam's hair. "It's like gold," she said.

Sam normally became annoyed with people who fixated on his hair, but Augustus's little daughter was so charming, he didn't mind her attention at all. In fact, he pulled his dagger from his belt and cut a lock from his head and gave it to Julia, who was delighted.

Augustus was clearly pleased, and he placed a hand on Sam's shoulder. "You'll make a fine father," he said.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "Coming from you that gives me great confidence. My younger siblings gave me good practice of course."

Augustus smirked at that. Sam knew he wasn't fond of the Hadius family nor was he fond of Sam's mother. Jacquetta tried way too hard to be Roman but could never break herself of her Gaulish habits. On the other hand, Latin and Roman customs came naturally to Sam, though inside he always felt like a Gaul.

"You know if you need anything, Sam, you just must ask," said Augustus.

Sam and Augustus's eyes met. "Thank you, Sir, but it is I who was born to serve you. Always remember that."

#

Nico looked around at the expansive Domus of 18 rooms that he had rented and thought it would do well. It was only a short distance from the Hadius house and a mere stone's throw away from the Palatine's best private bathhouse. The house needed some renovations and perhaps a fresh coat of paint on a few of the walls that had been bleached by sunlight, but it was solid and in an ideal location.

He knew the place had been mostly empty for a long while, the locals believing an ill omen hung over it. They probably weren't wrong, as the house had belonged to Marcus Brutus, one of the conspirators who had murdered Julius Caesar and who had later died in battle against Marc Antony.

Not being a local, Nico figured he could just have a cleansing ritual performed and that would be that. It wouldn't do to let such a good deal pass him by over the ghosts of the past. It was a beautiful house, after all, and he had rented it directly from Brutus's mother, Servilia, who was most happy to have the house lived in again.

The slaves that had accompanied Nico were busy making the place habitable, and they had even secured the services of some local servants, people who knew how to obtain the best meats and vegetables from the market.

Nico made his way into the house's courtyard and sat down one of the wooden chairs there. The courtyard had many thriving potted plants, so it almost felt as though he was in the forest. Obviously, Servilia's slaves hadn't kept up with pruning of the trees when the house was unoccupied.

Nico was thirsty and thought of ordering wine, but there was very little left from their travels. He'd wait until his new cook had obtained a better stock from the market. It wouldn't be long, as the man had already gone to obtain supplies.

It occurred to him that this was the first time he had ever had his own home, such that it was. That was something he could enjoy, and he even thought he might tour the city a bit before telling the Hadius family he had arrived. He wanted to see the Theatre of Pompey, not only because the building was said to rival anything in Athens but also he wanted to see where Julius Caesar had been killed. Of course, he had to attend a chariot race at the Circus Maximus and his mother wouldn't let him hear the end of it if he didn't make an offering at the Temple to Minerva. He also wanted to get tickets to see gladiatorial combat, as the matches in Rome were said to have no rival anywhere.

First, he needed to arrange a cleansing ritual for the house, and he also thought of contacting his cousins. Nico's mother had been born a Roman of the Quinticus family, and Nico had been named for her brother Nicodemus Aurelius Quinticus, who had died at Actium.

His Uncle Nico had been a witty and gracious man, able to quote Cicero one moment and make a risqué pun the next. He was brave and noble and good, and his ship was taken down in a hail of fire. It was the first time Nico had lost someone he loved.

He called to a slave and told him the address of the Domus Quinticus, and he told the man to announce his arrival to his cousins. He'd never met either of them, but he hoped they would prove trusted allies.

Chapter Seven

Nico looked around at the expansive Domus of 18 rooms that he had rented and thought it would do well. It was only a short distance from the Hadius house and a mere stone's throw away from the Palatine's best private bathhouse. The house needed some renovations and perhaps a fresh coat of paint on a few of the walls that had been bleached by sunlight, but it was solid and in an ideal location.

He knew the place had been mostly empty for a long while, the locals believing an ill omen hung over it. They probably weren't wrong, as the house had belonged to Marcus Brutus, one of the conspirators who had murdered Julius Caesar and who had later died in battle against Marc Antony.

Not being a local, Nico figured he could just have a cleansing ritual performed and that would be that. It wouldn't do to let such a good deal pass him by over the ghosts of the past. It was a beautiful house, after all, and he had rented it directly from Brutus's mother, Servilia, who was most happy to have the house lived in again.

The slaves that had accompanied Nico were busy making the place habitable, and they had even secured the services of some local servants, people who knew how to obtain the best meats and vegetables from the market.

Nico made his way into the house's courtyard and sat down one of the wooden chairs there. The courtyard had many thriving potted plants, so it almost felt as though he was in the forest. Obviously, Servilia's slaves hadn't kept up with pruning of the trees when the house was unoccupied.

Nico was thirsty and thought of ordering wine, but there was very little left from their travels. He'd wait until his new cook had obtained a better stock from the market. It wouldn't be long, as the man had already gone to obtain supplies.

It occurred to him that this was the first time he had ever had his own home, such that it was. That was something he could enjoy, and he even thought he might tour the city a bit before telling the Hadius family he had arrived. He wanted to see the Theatre of Pompey, not only because the building was said to rival anything in Athens but also he wanted to see where Julius Caesar had been killed. Of course, he had to attend a chariot race at the Circus Maximus and his mother wouldn't let him hear the end of it if he didn't make an offering at the Temple to Minerva. He also wanted to get tickets to see gladiatorial combat, as the matches in Rome were said to have no rival anywhere.

First, he needed to arrange a cleansing ritual for the house, and he also thought of contacting his cousins. Nico's mother had been born a Roman of the Quinticus family, and Nico had been named for her brother Nicodemus Aurelius Quinticus, who had died at Actium.

His Uncle Nico had been a witty and gracious man, able to quote Cicero one moment and make a risqué pun the next. He was brave and noble and good, and his ship was taken down in a hail of fire. It was the first time Nico had lost someone he loved.

He called to a slave and told him the address of the Domus Quinticus, and he told the man to announce his arrival to his cousins. He'd never met either of them, but he hoped they would prove trusted allies.

#

#

Sam entered the Atrium of the Domus Quinticus, and he expected to find Sabina waiting for him. Instead, her younger brother Titus greeted him. Sam always thought of Titus as a child, but he had grown into a lanky adolescent who would one day be a fine looking young man but now resembled a large puppy. He had his sister's angular features but while she was perpetually glaring, he was wide-eyed and good-natured.

"Hello, cousin," he said. "How fares Lilli?"

"Well, from what I've heard. It shouldn't be long," replied Sam.

"You're so lucky," said Titus. "I only hope I have as even-tempered and beautiful a wife."

Before Sam could answer, the doors to the nearby library flew open.

"Ah, cousin," said Sabina sweetly. "It's so kind of you to come and visit me. Don't pay any mind to Titus. I'm sure he has much to occupy him. His tutors say his Greek is improving."

Sam gave Titus a sympathetic look and entered the library. His cousin shut the door behind him. The two old slave women, Kaia and Aya, who looked after Sabina, sat in the corner. Sam wondered if they would report to Titus that Sabina was being courted, but he doubted it. They belonged to her, and they seemed to ignore her brother most of the time. Although, they also often seemed to be ignoring Sabina.

"Do you have a message?" said Sabina breathlessly.

Sam pulled a small scroll from his leather bag and handed it to her

"Have you ever thought that your brother might not approve of Eolus as a husband?" he asked. Since both their parents were dead, Titus would have to approve of any choice of husband for his sister. Sam couldn't imagine that ever happening given the Hadius family's reputation.

Sabina barely acknowledged Sam's question. Instead, she tucked the scroll into a fold in her dress. "I have something to show you," she said, and she produced a letter that had been written on a wax tablet.

"My Greek cousin, from the other side of my family, has come to Rome, and he wants Titus and me to come to dinner at his house. Get this, he's rented the Domus Brutus."

Sam's mouth dropped open, and he grabbed the missive and read it. "You're joking? Is he mad?"

She rolled her eyes. "He's Greek, and so no doubt he thinks he can have the house ritually cleansed of its bad omens. I suppose the Greeks aren't that terribly interested in our politics, but Nico's family benefited from Brutus's betrayal. He and his brothers fought at Actium. For Augustus of course."

Sam began to think, and he started to make a connection. "Why is he here?"

Sabina shrugged. "No idea. Maybe he just wanted to see the sights, but it's probably family business. They're traders." The way Sabina said the word, traders had a slight lilt to it. She had the Roman snobbery that was so commonplace. Traders were far beneath patrician landowners like the Quinticuses on the social ladder, especially Greek ones. The fact that Nicodemus Quinticus's sister had married into a family of Greek traders had been something of a scandal. The fact that the Hadiuses regularly engaged in trade made them something of a scandal as well.

Sam smiled to himself, he wasn't totally sure but this cousin seemed to fit Eolus's description of the young man he was to host. This was perfect. The young man he was tasked to soften up for the negotiations was, in fact, Sabina's cousin from the other side of her family. That was a good omen if there ever was one.

“Do you think he’s handsome?” asked Sabina.

Sam looked at the mosaic, which made the young man look like a dark-haired Adonis, with a strong Greek nose and fetching eyes. “It’s impossible to tell. No doubt the artist flattered his subject if he was well paid.”

Sabina laughed. “That’s just what I thought! Well, we’ll find out the truth soon enough. I suspect my aunt thinks I should become his wife.”

Sabina’s tone made it clear she had no intention of marrying her Greek cousin, and Sam made a mental note to make sure the young man did not fall for her charms, such as they were. She would only break his heart, and that would make Sam’s task more difficult.

“Oh, Sam,” said Sabina sweetly, “if you could manage to mention to your father that Titus wishes me to marry my newly arrived cousin, I would be very grateful.”

“I suppose it would be too obvious if you mentioned it in one of your letters,” replied Sam, who was feeling quite sorry for the young Greek already.

Being a pawn without realizing it was not enviable.

Chapter Eight

Nico watched as three priestesses burned sage and chanted in the atrium of his house. They even put some herbs into the impluvium, making the rainwater that collected in the cistern below free of water demons.

He didn't put much stock in ill omens, but this would put the minds of his slaves and servants to rest. Besides, one couldn't be too careful.

The ritual had taken a few hours, starting first at the house's ancestral chapel and then moving from room to room. The atrium was their last stop, thankfully. As the young women headed toward the front door, Nico paid them generously for their services. Hopefully, that would be the end of that.

He was just about to decide what to do next when there was a knock at the door, and Nico thought maybe one of the priestesses forgot something. One of the slaves opened just one of the double doors and another stood ready to take action should it be anyone with ill intent.

Whoever it was, Nico hoped he had no ill intent, for there stood a young man with hair so golden, Nico wondered if he might be the son of a God. Of course, he knew that wasn't so and that the young man was probably from one of the northern provinces. He'd seen such coloring before, of course, including the eyes the color of the sky, but never had it struck his heart so significantly.

The young man greeted him formally, and then he introduced himself as Eolus Hadius's son and handed him a sack of herbs which smelled wonderful but were not familiar to him.

"They're Gaulish. You will likely not have encountered them as far as Athens," said the young man. "My name is Sammius Hadius, but everyone calls me Sam."

Nico smiled, and he continued to inhale the scent of the herbs. He was sure his cook could make good use of them. “Your name has been Latinized. What was it when you were born?” he asked, hoping the young man wouldn’t be offended by the question.

“Sammiatrix,” Sam replied softly, “but I haven’t used that name in a long time.

“Well, Sam, you may call me Nico,” he replied, not wanting to press further. As a Greek, he had the luxury of keeping a Greek name. Most people from the provinces weren’t so fortunate.

“I’ve been asked by Eolus to be your host,” said Sam. “He wants you to enjoy your stay, and I’m here to see to that.”

Nico listened for any hint of suggestion in Sam’s voice, but there was none. The offer seemed innocent enough, and after all, even the Hadius family wouldn’t prostitute out an adopted son for a business deal. Unless, maybe, that son wanted to be prostituted.

Sam looked around. “I hear in its time this house was grander than Julius Caesar’s,” he said, “but are you sure you wish to reside here? There’s likely a curse still on it.”

Nico shook his head. “If there is, I need to get my money back from the three priestesses who spend the afternoon chanting and burning sage. They charged me quite a lot for the service.”

Sam visibly relaxed at this. “Well,” he said still looking around, “that’s something.”

“Did you know Brutus?” asked Nico.

Sam shook his head. “I’m not old enough to remember the time before Julius Caesar died.”

Nico looked at Sam, thinking briefly of how their lives had been so changed by long-dead men they had never met. Men who had thought they were saving the Republic but had destroyed it, instead. “I saw Marc Antony more than once when I was a boy. He and Octavia resided in

Athens for a while. My grandfather had her over to our house for dinner many a time after Antony...went to Egypt.”

Nico wondered if bringing up the unfortunate situation with Antony was rude, but Sam didn't seem offended.

Sam stepped forward, still looking around at the Atrium. “You'll likely meet her again during your stay. She comes for dinner at the Hadius house often. Her younger daughter with Antony is of an age with my mother and Eolus's twins. She's also raising Antony's children with Queen Cleopatra. Those twins are of an age with my youngest sister. So, the Hadius house sometimes feels more like a playground when she comes.”

“I am the youngest child,” replied Nico wistfully. “I've hardly ever been around children.” He paused. “Forgive me, I've not offered you wine, but I've only just arrived, not even spent one night in this place. I'm hardly ready for an honored guest. I've still got a layer of road dust on me.”

Sam looked Nico up and down, and he couldn't have failed to notice that his tunic was several shades darker than it should have been.

“Well,” replied Sam, “I think it best we get you to the baths immediately. They're not far. It will do you good.”

Nico felt his cheeks get warm, as a trip to the baths with this young man would be most welcome. Most welcome indeed.

#

The public baths of Palatine Hill were excellent, but Sam took Nico to a large, private bathhouse that had some of the finest facilities city. Sam knew Nico would be impressed. Clean, large and with multiple amenities such as an area for exercise, a library and a green space for relaxing,

they had whiled away several hours. They had exercised, bathed in one of the main pools and now both young men were lying on their stomachs in one of the smaller, heated chambers and enjoying the massage services of some of the attendants.

This bath was highly respectable, so available prostitutes were discrete so as not offend the many Roman matrons who attended. Even the massage services were chaste, designed to help muscle tension and no other type of tension. Augustus's enforcement of morality codes ensured all of this.

Certainly, there were plenty of seedier bathhouses, not to mention brothels, not far away because the city hadn't changed that much, but this bathhouse maintained a veneer of respectability.

Still, as far as Sam could see, Nico seemed content with things as they were and didn't seem to crave anything else.

Since it was his job to make Nico happy, Sam wondered what other kinds of pleasure Nico would want and whether he would even need Sam's help in obtaining it. Nico, who was one of the most beautiful young men he had ever seen, was dark haired and honey-eyed and every bit as an Adonis as the mosaic had portrayed, and he would have no problem finding women to warm his bed. The bathhouse attendants, both men and women, seemed eager to give him extra attention, smiling and one young man even winked. Sam even wondered if maybe Sabina would find him a worthy alternative to Eolus once she met him.

In fact, Sam himself had felt a bit flustered at the sight of Nico's naked body, so much he had had to studiously avoid Nico's eyes when they were in the pool together. Even now, Sam tried to keep his eyes on the floor and only occasionally glanced over at the young Greek whose company he had already found so engaging.

Sam was devoted to Lilli, but he had always found the sight of beautiful young men pleasing. That was normal. Aside from a few light encounters, the kind that were commonplace among boys, he had never acted on these feelings. As Augustus had taught him, he always channeled his desires to his wife. Yet, Sam had to work not to stare at Nico.

“I so need this,” sighed the young Greek. “I haven’t slept in a proper bed in weeks, and I’ve never traveled quite so far from home. Every muscle in my body has been aching.”

Sam inhaled deeply, enjoying the strong hands of the man who was rubbing his shoulders. “Hopefully, you’ll sleep well tonight, especially if the ill spirits are truly gone from your house.”

Sam turned and saw Nico was looking at him with what only could be described as amusement. “The moment you walked into my door, I knew that no ill omens could remain on the house.”

Sam looked away, feeling his cheeks get warm. Nico’s remark seemed flirtatious, though Sam couldn’t be certain. “I’m sure the bed will be comfortable as well.” Sam felt like he should mention he was married, but surely Nico had seen his ring. “You’ve obtained a featherbed I assume?”

Nico yawned and seemed to be enjoying the massage. “I think my women should be finished sewing it by tonight. I’m looking forward to it. I lived rough on the ship and on the road, sleeping only on straw and only that if it was available. Although, I was happy to make the trip. I saw many things during the journey, and I plan on seeing many things while I’m here.”

“Had you traveled much before?” asked Sam. Sam had seen much of Gaul’s coast when he was a boy, but since he had moved to Rome he had not been outside the city much except a few trading trips with Eolus.

Nico nodded. "My family builds ships," he replied. "I've been to Byzantium and Alexandria. I was at Actium, on one of the ships that fought for Octavian. I mean Augustus."

Sam was impressed by this, of course. Actium was the greatest Roman victory of all time, and it had secured Augustus's hold on power.

"I've never put much stock in the gods," replied Sam, "but those that were there tell me that the wind favored Augustus so much that even the most irreligious men believed his victory was fated."

Nico turned to look at Sam. "You know, I saw him from a distance. He was standing on the deck of his ship. If he was scared, there was no sign of it."

Sam was pleased to hear this but not at all surprised. Augustus...Gaius...did believe that the gods were with him, and he also believed in the responsibility that came with that. "Augustus isn't like Marc Antony was. He's confident, and he can be ruthless. But he needs no more money or glory. He wants to do right by Rome. Perhaps that's why the gods favor him so much."

"You know him then?" asked Nico.

Sam turned away, and then said casually. "My family always backs the right horse, and they've backed the Julian party going back to Julius Caesar and the days of the first triumvirate. Augustus has been to the house many a time, especially before Actium."

Nico seemed very interested. "What manner of man is he? Really?"

Sam thought carefully. It was so hard to articulate Augustus's character. "He's brilliant but cold and measured. He'll do what he thinks is best always, whatever the cost to himself. He is...pure-hearted but not warm." Sam heard his own voice and realized that he may not be making his case well.

Nico didn't say a word, but he seemed to be thinking about this carefully. Sam didn't blame him. All of their fates were in Augustus's hands after all.

In any case, the two young men soon were redressed in fresh tunics, and they headed back to the Domus Brutus. Down one of the less busy streets, Sam heard a soft whining sound coming from one of the fountains. He moved to check and saw a waterlogged kitten flailing in an attempt to save itself from drowning.

Sam retrieved the animal from the fountain, examining it for wounds but also petting it. Sam then cuddled it close to his body, not minding the fur and moisture that would stick to his tunic.

"This little fellow appears to have had a bad day," said Sam.

"Not so much now that he's found a savior," replied Nico, clearly amused. "What do you plan to do with him? There's so many dogs and other beasts roaming about, perhaps letting him drown would be the most kind thing."

Sam looked at the sad little feline, who was black with a white stomach and white paws and white whiskers, and Sam shook his head. "My wife is taking bedrest. No doubt she is bored to tears and could use company other than the household women. She's also rather fond of cats and rather averse to mice. I think this little fellow ...or rather girl...will bring her good cheer."

Nico smiled at the kitten, and he spoke softly. "May the gods favor the birth, your son be strong. Your wife is a lucky woman to have such a caring husband. How long have you been wed?"

"Almost a year," said Sam. "She's a true Roman, and she's beautiful and virtuous, and I am a very lucky man." Sam sighed and petted the kitten's head. "Her women are far too strict

about not letting me near her. I think I shall take this girl home, clean her and put a bow around her neck before passing her to my wife through the back window.”

Nico also petted the kitten, which elicited a soft mew. “I’ve got some silk ribbon that was meant to be a gift for your mother, but I think I might spare a length. I’m not quite ready to dine with the jackals of your family, but if you come to my house, we can clean this girl up and tie her neck with ribbon that would be the envy of Augustus’s wife. Then, we shall have whatever my cook has prepared for this evening’s meal. I assure you that the ritual cleansing has been done.”

Sam smiled at Nico, and he graciously accepted the invitation. He had only one friend his own age, and that was Marcus, and he was far away. It was good to have a new friend, especially one that didn’t mind a guest with a waterlogged stray kitten.

Chapter Nine

Sam sat on a cushion in Nico's dining room, enjoying wine and admiring the murals that surrounded them. They depicted the glory days of the Republic, and Sam assumed they must have been commissioned by Brutus. That fact made the images feel very melancholy.

Sam had been nervous to even come inside this grand and beautiful house, but it certainly didn't feel cursed, and the little kitten, who Sam had gently washed in a basin and been fed a saucer of milk, slept in Sam's lap. Nico sat next to them, also drinking wine and lounging against a bolster.

"She needs a name," said Nico, reaching over and petting the kitten with his finger.

"I think she shall be the queen of my household," replied Sam. "So, I think I will call her Cleopatra. My wife will approve of the name, as she always admired the late queen, though she would never say so aloud."

Nico smiled. "I never gazed on the Queen of Egypt. I understand she was no great beauty but regal."

Sam nodded. "I never saw her either, but I know those who did when she visited Rome. They say she looked far more Greek than Egyptian, but she wore an elaborate Egyptian wig shot through with gold thread and a gown to match. They say she was every inch a queen, and beautiful in her way."

Nico sighed. "My family backed Octavian, but I was sad to hear of her death. It was the end of an era. No more Pharaohs." Nico looked around. "I hope Brutus's spirit rests. I know your family are Julians, as are mine, but I think Brutus thought he did the right thing. He was wrong, like the tragic heroes of old."

Sam took another sip of wine. Nico was thoughtful, and he had compassion. That was quite unusual, especially in a Greek.

“You know,” continued Nico who obviously trying to sound less sad, “it’s appropriate to call her Cleopatra. Octavian ordered that we all have cats on our ships at Actium, and some the legionaries carried them, too. Cats are sacred to the Egyptians, and they fear killing them.”

Sam smiled because he had heard this story, and he thought he might ask Augustus about that the next time they met. Augustus was clever that way, though Sam doubted Augustus himself thought cats were anything other than useful for eliminating rats and mice.

“Tell me about Actium,” said Sam. “Was it frightening? Mark Antony could have easily won the day, and Augustus lost ships.”

Nico nodded. “Yes, it was frightening,” he replied, “we had a more than one frightening moment, and my Uncle lost his life.”

Nico continued, talking in vivid detail about everything he had seen that day. Sam listened, envious that Nico had seen such a momentous day with his own eyes. Sam was still a schoolboy when Actium had happened, although he had heard Augustus speak of it. Still, it was not the same as being there.

Nico’s slaves served them a good meal, more wine and Nico told Sam about seeing Byzantium and Alexandria while Sam talked about what he remembered of Gaul and its sky-like waters and also the time he had gone with Eolus to Pompeii.

The laughed and talked, and Sam drank more wine than he was used to drinking, and he suspected Nico’s stock wasn’t very diluted. Sam glanced over at Nico, who was very beautiful and charming. Sam also could hear rain on the roof and falling into the courtyard. There, he could also see that lightning was illuminating the sky. Thunder clapped in the distance.

“You’re not married?” asked Sam. “I would think every respectable family from here to Athens with an eligible maiden would be offering you a dowery.”

Nico laughed. “You sound like my mother, but no I am not married nor do I wish to be. Yet, I daresay I envy you. You seem to have a great deal of affection for your wife.”

Sam smiled to himself, trying to figure out how to explain. “It was something of a love match. My first stepfather died suddenly during the purges, and he left his daughter with no family. I offered for her because I feared what Eolus would do to her. We were betrothed but obviously had to wait some years before we were officially married because we were so young.”

Nico smiled. “Very gallant of you. You must love her.”

Sam sighed and downed the last of his wine and called for more. He loved Lilli dearly, although at the moment he was slightly ashamed at how little he missed her.

“She is most worthy of love,” he finally said. “I miss her. We are great friends, and she always gives me wonderful advice about dealing with my mother and Eolus. I hope soon enough that I will be able to afford my own household, even if it is somewhere like Nardo, where we both were born. She will make a wonderful lady of the house.”

Nico grinned at that. “Well,” he replied, “I hope that our negotiations make all of us more independent.”

Sam then took Cleopatra in his hand, and he attempted to stand up, but he was wobbly.

Nico sat up and moved toward Sam. “This is a fierce storm,” he said. “There’s no need to go out in it. You and Cleopatra may stay as my guests.”

Sam paused. He had been sleeping in a small chamber by himself since being ejected from Lilli’s room. It would make very little difference if he stayed on a palate here, and when he

thought about it, there were probably just as many evil spirits in the Domus Hadius as were in the Domus Brutus.

Sam petted Cleopatra. “I need only a place for this little one to sleep, and a palate for myself.”

Nico shook his head. “Don’t be silly. My bed is big enough for two,” he said. “I would be an ill-mannered host if I didn’t offer to share. With you, I mean. The kitten, I think, will wish to roam the kitchens.”

Sam looked over at Nico, and he felt his face get warm. He cast his eyes down at Cleopatra and nodded. He wasn’t sure why the idea of sharing Nico’s bed made him so nervous, but he could guess. He wondered if Nico wanted something more, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Sam wasn’t naive, but he had been betrothed to Lilli when they were both very young and had honored his commitment to her. That had kept him from indulging in more hedonistic desires.

In any case, soon the two young men had made the kitten a little bed near the kitchen where she would be warm and safe and be able to explore in the night. Then, they retired to Nico’s bedroom. Sam undid his sandals, thinking he would sleep in his tunic, but he noticed that Nico stripped all the way down to his loincloth before slipping under the blankets. It made sense, after all, Athens had a much warmer climate than Rome.

Sam took off his tunic as well, and Nico who was propped on one of the many pillows smiled at him in the lamplight.

“Come on,” he said. “I promise I don’t talk in my sleep or snore...not usually anyway. If I do, promise me you’ll only tell me what I say if it isn’t too embarrassing.”

Sam smiled slightly and got under the covers. The feather bed was comfortable, far more so than the pallet he had been sleeping on over the last weeks.

“Sleep well, my friend,” said Nico.

Sam yawned, and for some reason, he knew he would.

#

Nico lay on his back, looking at the ceiling of his new house and listening to the sound of the rain, and wondered if the house was indeed cursed. Whatever malevolent spirits were left had a sense of humor, because Nico was in bed with the most beautiful young man he had ever seen but touching that man might destroy the trade deal he had come to Rome to negotiate.

Moreover, having been to the baths with Sam, Nico now suspected why the superstitious Hadius family would have kept the son of a barbarian in the house, and it wasn't just out of kindness. Sam was heavily favored by fortune, having a large, impressive cock, the kind of cock that the Romans believed brought good luck to a household. It was no wonder the Hadiuses had welcomed him into their household so fully.

Now, that luck was in Nico's house. Maybe the deal would go his way now that Sam was blessing his house and not the Hadiuses. Nico certainly hoped so.

Nico loved his family, and his recent behavior had caused him to fall from grace in their eyes. He was not ashamed of what he had done or what he had felt for the young slave he had freed, but he didn't want to lose his family's love over it. So, he wanted to do well in these negotiations and show he was as shrewd a trader as his father and grandfather. For that, he would have to be aggressive in matters of business. He had to show them he wasn't a weak-willed fool.

Perhaps if he found a more socially appropriate lover, that would help as well. Of course, socially appropriate meant a concubine who did not chafe against the role and wouldn't complain when Nico took a wife. It certainly didn't mean a social equal from another prominent family.

Nico looked over at Sam, who was on his stomach clutching at a pillow and sleeping soundly, as though he had no cares at all. Ever since they had gone to the baths, Nico had sought some sign that Sam would be agreeable to his advances, but Sam was merely friendly and courteous. On the other hand, Sam's beauty and something in his manner gave Nico hope. He preferred his lovers to want to be with him, and so he had learned the signs that a young man might prefer the company of other young men in his bed. Sam had a few of them, but he also had a wife and appeared to buy into Augustus's peculiar campaign to make Rome more chaste.

It was a puzzle and one that was made more frustrating by the fact that Nico's body was tormented by the proximity of Sam's body. He knew there must be places where he could find relief, and he knew they wouldn't be that far away. Sam could probably help him find them, but Nico's heart had been struck by an arrow when he saw Sam. He had no inclination to rise from his bed, as long as Sam was in it, even if it was a kind of torture.

There was a loud thunderclap, and Sam stirred and turned toward Nico. To Nico's surprise, Sam cuddled up against him and went back to sleep. Nico put his arm around Sam, and he cursed the gods for giving him this temptation. Then, he smiled to himself and thanked them. He kissed the top of Sam's head and then attempted to sleep himself.

The attempt failed, but after some time Sam awoke and smiled at him. "I'm used to being in bed with my wife, I hope you don't mind."

Nico looked Sam in the eyes. "I'm happy to be a substitute," he said suggestively.

Sam looked at him, then he looked away. The light was too low to determine if Sam was blushing, but Nico had a sense that he was.

“I didn’t mean...never mind,” said Nico who moved to disentangle himself from Sam.

To Nico’s shock, Sam resisted and pulled him gently closer. Nico became achingly aware of their bare skin touching and shifted a bit hoping Sam wouldn’t notice how hard his cock was.

Sam said nothing, and he didn’t move to do anything either. It was a most peculiar turn of events, and Nico had no idea how to respond. So, he didn't respond at all as Sam fell back to sleep.

Chapter Ten

Sam awoke in the morning to find Nico was not in bed with him anymore. He arose and put on his sandals and tunic and set about to find his new friend. Sam had slept well and the air was fresh because the storm had cleared out the humidity, so it felt good to breathe in the fresh air that was coming from the courtyard. Yet, he was troubled.

Sam had spent more than a few platonic nights with Marcus, but the previous night had been somehow different. Sam suspected that Nico might have more prurient desires, the kind that Augustus frowned upon. Of course, Augustus frowned upon men taking any lovers that weren't their wives, male or female. The first citizen believed in the Roman family unit, and since Sam had been married he had been the model husband. He had not even so much been tempted into another woman's bed, even avoiding the slaves and prostitutes that were not covered under the city's strict adultery laws. This was a point of pride for Sam, but now he felt uneasy.

Sam wasn't about to deny what he had experienced the night before, and he knew had felt desire for Nico. He just wasn't sure what he should do. He made his way to the courtyard, where he saw Nico sitting on a bench and using a piece of twine to entertain Cleopatra, who jumped around like some sort of insect.

“Good morning,” said Nico.

“Good morning,” replied Sam.

“There's some bread for breakfast,” said Nico. “I thought we could eat out here since the air is so fresh. Brutus's ancestor, whoever built this place, chose an ideal location in that respect.”

Sam nodded and he knelt down and petted the kitten. “I'll take her to my wife today. Lilli must be very bored. Hopefully, Cleopatra will entertain her.” Sam stopped speaking for a

moment, but he decided to bring up business. “Soon,” he eventually said, “you should expect a dinner invitation to the Hadius house. I assure you the evening will not be boring.”

Nico looked down at Sam and smiled, and Sam felt simultaneously happy and uneasy at the sight of him. “As long as you are there,” said Nico, “I won’t be bored.”

Sam got up and sat next to Nico on the bench, and Nico reached over and placed his hand on Sam's and Sam’s heart started to beat. “I was happy for your company last night,” said Sam suddenly.

“And I yours,” said Nico.

Their eyes met, and Sam a jolt of delight in the intimacy of the moment, such as he had never quite experienced before. It was like there was a secret between them.

“Augustus says that we must channel our baser desires to our wives,” blurted Sam. “That we must keep things pure.”

Nico seemed a bit annoyed by this remark, but then he looked Sam straight in the eyes. “So, things have been pure between you and the Emperor?”

Sam’s eyes widened. “Don’t ever call him that. He’s the First Citizen, and yes, he understands that we all have baser desires but they can be channeled to what is right and good. There are many fine girls here in Rome. You could easily find a wife. Lady Sabina thinks your mother wants...” Sam stopped talking. Nico had an expression that was a mixture of amusement and irritation.

Nico leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek and then whispered in his ear. “I agree with the First Citizen on one thing. That you deserve that which is pure and good. We just might disagree on the details.”

Sam felt his face get warm, and he laughed nervously. Still, Sam had no desire to leave Nico's company. In fact, he was looking forward to getting to know him. This flirting, he told himself, was just something the Greeks did, and as long as Sam channeled his desires toward Lilli, there was nothing wrong with being close to Nico in the way he was close to Augustus. It felt a little like getting too close to a fire, but Sam told himself he wouldn't get burned.

“I supposed I should deliver Cleopatra to my wife,” said Sam softly as he stood up and gathered the kitten into his arms.

He hurried out of Nico's house, and he headed straight home. He knew just which back streets and alleys to cut through to get to the Domus Hadius, but he did not enter through the front door. Instead, he went around the back to a small window on the east side of the house.

Sam held Cleopatra in his hands, petting her and making sure the ribbon around her neck was visible and tied in a symmetrical bow. He then whistled and tossed a pebble at the shutters beneath his head.

He waited, and then he saw Lilli peer out, looking around cautiously.

Black-haired and olive-skinned, Lilli had a round face, soft, pleasing features and bright eyes. As far as Sam was concerned, she was the prettiest girl in the world. Even though she was quite close to giving birth, he felt a pang of desire for her. He missed her touch, and he was very glad he still lusted for her. Wanting a new thing didn't mean one had to lose one's taste for the familiar.

“Good day,” he said. “I hope you don't mind me disturbing you, fair lady.”

She looked over her shoulder. “You're not supposed to be here or even see me like this. I look like a cow,” she whispered.

Sam laughed, and he wondered if she had had a visit from Sabina. He couldn't see her belly from where he stood, but her face looked only slightly rounder than when he had last seen her. She most certainly did not look bovine.

"How fares our child? Is she giving you much trouble?" he asked.

Lilli leaned over. "You're still so certain it will be a girl. He or she is kicking like mad, will show himself sooner rather than later so I am told. Now, what is that in your arms?"

Sam had placed a small stool against the wall, and he stepped on it and held Cleopatra aloft. "I thought you could use company," he said. "I found this little girl nearly drowned, but I think she might be willing to trade mouse hunting services for pans of goat's milk and some petting. I've called her Cleopatra."

Lilli grinned, and she took the little kitten into her arms. "She's so tiny. I think we shall be great friends, and when we are all reunited the four of us shall be a family."

Sam smiled, and he couldn't agree more. "I'm working on something for Eolus, if it works, we shall have our own household, and I shall make sure you have a garden of your own and a bed made of silk and linen."

Lilli looked skeptically at Sam, but she nodded. "You will have a chance to tell me all, but now I must go. I hear your mother at the door. No doubt she's come to harangue me about what I've eaten and whether her grandson has changed position."

Sam sighed. His mother meant well, but she felt like she owned everyone and everything she cared about. She didn't know how to just let someone live their life.

"Good luck, and take care of both of the new members of our family," said Sam as Lilli disappeared.

He smiled and hopped off the stool. He was glad to make Lilli happy, and he was looking forward to the birth of his child. He planned to be there to see the child grow, unlike his own father.

He took the stool and returned it to one of the household slaves, and then he felt suddenly very lonely without the little fur ball he had rescued. He sighed, and he reminded himself that Lilli would have plenty of time and attention for the kitten, and he would be reunited with them both in short order, as long as everything with the birth went smoothly. Sam had to believe it would. After all, his own mother had given birth to four children and she was strong as an amazon.

Sam walked through the alley, and around to the front entrance of the house. He entered through the front door, to see Eolus standing there looking impatient.

“Where were you last night?” asked Eolus.

Sam sighed. “You wouldn’t be asking if you didn’t already know.”

Eolus grinned. “Tell me, what manner of man is the young Greek? What will soften him to our negotiations? He must have given you a hint.”

Sam wasn’t about tell Eolus what he suspected about Nico’s desires, but he knew he had to say something. “I’ve known him for less than a day,” said Sam. “I know he rented Brutus’s house, and although he had a de-hex put on it he doesn’t seem terribly worried. No doubt the bargain makes it easier.”

Eolus smirked at that, but Eolus couldn’t hide that he was unnerved. Everyone in Rome thought that house was cursed, even cynics like Eolus. “Did you sleep at all?” he asked.

“I slept like a baby,” replied Sam. “I couldn’t let my host think I was coward.”

Eolus actually seemed impressed by this. “Go on, Sammius. What else can we get him? Do for him?”

Sam shrugged. “I know that he seems eager to see a chariot race. There’s one tomorrow, and we plan to go. I also warned him that he’d be expected to show up here for dinner. I assume we’ll be putting up a respectable front.”

Eolus glared at Sam, and for a second he thought he’d crossed a line. Eolus could be rather touchy about the less than savory means by which his family maintained its wealth. Sam managed not to wince in anticipation of a blow, but thankfully the blow never came.

“Well,” replied Eolus as he turned and headed toward his office, “I think two nights from now is as good a time as any.”

Sam followed him and watched as Eolus sat down and composed an invitation. He handed the wax tablet to Sam.

“Being your messenger is becoming tiresome,” said Sam.

Eolus rolled his eyes. “You know none of the slaves will go near the house, no matter what I threaten them with.”

Sam took the message. “I’ll go. I can solidify our plans to attend the races tomorrow.”

Eolus seemed satisfied with that, and he dismissed Sam with a gesture. Sam headed out of the house and through the crowded streets. Sam cut through a market square, and he stopped to purchase some bread that he knew was particularly good.

He took the bread and the message and knocked on the door to Brutus’s house, or rather Nico’s house. It was easier for him to think of it as Nico’s house.

An older man opened the door, and he clearly recognized Sam from the night before.

“I’ve a message from my father,” said Sam formally, “and I’ve bread for your master.”

The man took the bread, and he told Sam to wait in the courtyard. Sam sat down on the bench, and he waited. The trees and shrubs that grew in the courtyard seemed to have been pruned and sculpted a bit, and the house felt more lived-in and inviting.

Nico finally appeared, and Sam presented the message, which Nico read immediately.

“So I am to dine with your family,” he said.

“Our mutual cousins will be there, as well as my mother, father and grandfather and if we’re lucky my Uncle Marcus. He’s Eolus’s half-brother and nothing like Eolus. He’s of age with us, and he can be cheerful company. That is, if Lady Sabina’s presence doesn’t cause him to begin weeping at odd intervals. He’s in love with her, you see, but she’s got her sights set on my stepfather as he’s the legitimate heir. Hopefully, my mother, his wife, won’t notice his attention toward the younger, richer and more respectable woman.”

Nico seemed both interested and amused. “I assure you dinners at my family home can be just as complicated. Did you see Cleopatra safe to her new home?”

Sam smiled and described his encounter with his wife and her delight at the kitten.

Nico clapped Sam on the shoulder. “Well, I think a toast is in order for your impending fatherhood. I’ll send for wine. Unless you have other plans for the evening, you are welcome to stay again. If the palate you’ve been exiled to in the Hadius house beckons, however, you are welcome to go home.”

Sam smiled. “You know I’ve been tasked to soften you up for the negotiations. I didn’t break it to my father that you seemed a little savvier, but as long as you don’t mind my nefarious intentions, I will stay.”

Nico laughed and then ordered some wine.

As they seated themselves near one another, Nico spoke. “I may be savvy but there are ways of softening me up,” he said.

Sam started to feel warm, even though the courtyard was cool. Nico was flirting again. Sam cast his eyes at his feet. “Well, we could go to the races tomorrow. They are running them all day.’”

Nico reacted eagerly to that suggestion, and Sam was happy they had something to talk about that was less personal. Still, as nervous as he was around Nico, he was very glad to be in his company and looked forward to sharing his bed again.

Chapter Eleven

The chariot races were unlike anything Nico had ever seen. He had been to many in Athens, but the ones in Rome were longer, more intense, more exhilarating and more violent than anything he had witnessed as a boy. There had been three grisly crashes that afternoon, including one where a driver had been killed when he had fallen under his own wheel. It hadn't taken more than a few moments before the unfortunate man's body had been carted away and another race had begun.

It was grim, but Nico supposed it was part of the risk of the sport. Nico glanced over at Sam, who seemed saddened by the man's death but not overly concerned. It was apparently a regular occurrence here.

Nico also was particularly fascinated by the racers, who all had physiques that would equal gladiators and weren't shy about showing them off. The racers appeared to come from all parts of the Empire, some even appeared to be from the far north and far east. Nico wondered how they had come to this place. Unlike gladiators, the chariot racers weren't slaves. If they survived their profession, Nico supposed it was a fine way for a man with no education to make his fortune.

"It takes both bravery and skill to be a chariot racer," said Nico. "I raced a bit when I was younger, but of course my father would never have allowed me at this level. Far too dangerous."

Sam appeared impressed. "I would have bet on you had I been at your race," he said coyly.

Nico bit his lip. Sam was flirting. He knew it. He just didn't know what he meant by it, which was both intriguing and irritating.

After the races, they walked through the streets, where fans were celebrating or lamenting, it was difficult to tell which, with copious amounts of wine.

Without even asking, Sam obtained them a couple of cups from a street vendor, and Sam smiled at him as he took a sip.

“Don’t gulp it as you would breakfast wine,” said Sam. “It’s not diluted much at all. You’ll feel it very shortly.”

Nico smiled, resolving to sip it slowly, and wondering if Sam was trying to get him drunk. The streets were dangerous, and he was obviously not from Rome and wealthy. He would make an easy mark if he became drunk on these unruly streets.

“I’m sure we could hire a litter or cart if you don’t want to walk,” said Sam.

Nico shook his head. “I’m hardly a vestal virgin,” he replied. “Besides, I don’t know how long I’ll be here, and I want to soak up as much of the local ambiance as I can while I’m here. Rome’s sights are legendary.”

Sam smiled and sipped his wine as well.

“What shall we do now?” asked Sam tentatively. “We can return to your house to be sure, but if there’s somewhere else you’d rather go...”

Sam’s eyes moved to a nearby building, in which several very young and pretty women who were most certainly not vestal virgins beckoned from the balcony.

Nico laughed. “I’d rather not partake,” he said. “Although, I’m happy to see the whores of Rome are of excellent quality.”

Sam sighed. “Not all of them are, but that place is very expensive. So I’ve been told. By my friend Marcus. He should know.”

Nico looked at Sam, “Do you wish to go? I know you are separated from your wife.”

Sam blushed and shook his head, looking down at his feet. Nico suddenly felt warm and giddy, as though he had drunk all the wine but it had really been only a sip. Most young men separated from their wives would eagerly visit a brothel, but more and more Nico was sure Sam's inclinations were elsewhere, even if Sam hadn't quite realized it yet.

"Well," said Nico, "I can again invite you to my home. We can drink more wine and you can lament the loss of your beautiful wife, even for this short time. Perhaps we can think of names for your son or daughter."

Sam grinned, and they walked on through the streets. As they went, Sam chattered about going to the theatre or seeing a puppet show or some acrobats. He promised that the entertainments of Rome knew no boundaries, and the chariot races were just the beginning.

Nico smiled to himself, thinking that all he wanted was to return to his house and share some more strong wine with Sam and talk. At least that he told himself briefly before grinning and biting his lip. Of course he wanted more. Sam was gorgeous and seemed rather sweet natured on top of that.

They walked and talked through the wild streets, remarking on everything from the young men dressed as women, to a tavern brawl to the fortune tellers offering to read their future, but eventually all of the hedonistic elements disappeared as they reached the patrician part of the hill and Nico's house.

"I'm dusty," said Nico as they stood in the atrium and Nico brushed off his toga. "Why don't I have my women draw us up a bath. It's not like the bathhouse, but it will certainly do."

Sam smiled and agreed, and Nico realized that Sam simply assumed he would be staying the night. This was perfectly agreeable to Nico, as was the thought of bathing with him in a more

private setting. Nico wondered if he should have drunk another cup of the strong wine to make him bolder since he was suddenly a little nervous.

Soon after, they were standing in the bathing room, having the women remove their clothes. Nico kept his eyes on everything but Sam's body, and he thought maybe he'd gone mad.

He looked up and Sam smiling at him, nervously. By the gods, he was blushing.

Nico couldn't help himself. He leaned over and kissed Sam, and when it was Sam smiled at him and laughed.

"I was getting nervous that I would have to be the one to seduce you," he said, "and since I've never seduced a man before I'm grateful I didn't have to."

Nico shook his head. "You've been doing an excellent job. I'm impressed, except next time you should not admit your intent. Let your quarry think the whole thing was his idea. It will make him feel powerful."

Sam took Nico's hand. "Powerful? Or arrogant? I can't stand arrogant men."

Nico squeezed his hand. "Thankfully, I known all through Athens for my ability to charm men through my humility and ability to make them forget they are standing in tepid water."

Sam laughed and climbed out of the tub. He reached his hand out to Nico. "Come on," he said, "I'm getting chilled and your newly sewn mattress is warm."

Nico inhaled. He couldn't believe his luck. At least, he hoped it was luck.

Chapter Twelve

Marcus sat in a tavern near the river and he drank his third goblet of wine. He wasn't a patient man, and he had been patient enough waiting the man he was set to meet. The man ran in an unusual circle, filled with people Marcus had only hear others talk about. Poets. Philosophers. Grammarians. These were the type of people Sam might find interesting. had a reputation for being very brilliant, and to Marcus's sensibilities, very boring.

Yet, there was a man who was of an age with himself and Sam that the young women who worked at the tavern spoke highly of. In fact, they often spent a significant amount of time talking about his way with words. He wrote poetry that charmed and beguiled the ladies of the tavern in a way that took their attention away from Marcus, who was quite used to being the one who charmed them.

Still, Marcus knew his own limitations. He had made a strategic decision that if he was to woo Sabina, he would need help from a man who could use words that Sabina would find impressive.

Finally, after some time, a young man with a large nose and rather muscular arms sat down across from Marcus. He wasn't much to look at, so it was no wonder he had had to develop a way with words.

"You're Marcus Laberius?" he said, with an unmistakable tone of amusement.

"That's my name," replied Marcus. "I'm glad you could meet me."

The man beckoned one of the women for a goblet of wine. "I hear the blood in your veins doesn't match that name."

Marcus rolled his eyes. "Everyone knows that, including my creditors. They know I'm always good for the money I borrow."

With that, the man laughed and gulped the wine that had just been brought to him. “I’m Publius Ovidius Naso,” said the man. “You obviously know my work, or you wouldn’t have asked me here. I’m the youngest poet to ever have read in the forum.”

Marcus wondered if that was true. He blinked.

“Ovid. You might know me by that name. I’ve read dozens of poems in the forum...if you didn’t know that why did you ask for me?”

Marcus shrugged.

“I don’t know of those poems or that name,” replied Marcus. “I just know of the ones you read the ladies ...that work here. They find them flattering and they seem to inspire affection. That’s what I need.”

Ovid smiled. “So, you’ve got to woo a young woman? Is she one of the girls here?”

Marcus gasped, offended. “No, she is the Lady Sabina and she wouldn’t be caught in a place such as this. She’s...”

Ovid grinned. “I hear she’s rich. You’re smarter than you look.”

Marcus glared at him. “I would marry her if she was poor.”

Ovid laughed. “That’s a good start. I can write a line that says as much. The girl will love it.”

Marcus shook his head. “No...maybe yes. Just write something beautiful and impressive that she will believe I wrote.”

Ovid stared at Marcus and whatever he was about to say, he apparently thought the better of it. After all, Marcus had planned to pay him well.

“I’ve seen the girl,” said Ovid. “She’s not beautiful but she doesn’t smile enough.”

Marcus glared. “Her not smiling at you shows her good judgement.”

Ovid snickered at that. “Perhaps you are right.”

Marcus leaned over. “Do you work. Make it good. If it does what I intend, then I’ll give you a bonus.”

Ovid looked around the room. “Oh, knowing you two are happy will be all the bonus I need.”

The sarcasm was not lost on Marcus, but he was still hopeful this plan would work.

Chapter Thirteen

Nico awoke to find his bedroom had darkened since the oil lamps had burned out. It was still night, and only faint light from the street torches crept through the shutters, so Nico knew he hadn't been asleep for long. He was naked, under the blankets and propped up on a pillow. Sam was curled up next to him, his head resting on his hands and sleeping peacefully. Nico's bare leg rested gently against Sam's back, and he didn't want to move lest he disturb his lover.

Nico smiled to himself, and even in the darkness, he found Sam's beauty breathtaking. He was also worried. The Romans were famously backward about what they called The Greek Habits. It was fine for men to use male slaves and prostitutes, but only if they were dominant and affection was prohibited. They rejected the idea of men falling in love, and they mercilessly demeaned men who took pleasure in taking rather than giving cock.

In his much superior culture, even gods like Apollo and heroes like Achilles and Hercules fell in love with men. While it was true that aristocratic men were still expected to marry and have children, most people in his homeland understood that some men were simply not inclined to marry. There were even villages and neighborhoods where men could live together and bond together as brothers, becoming legally bound to each other as strongly as married couples. In Alexandria, male couples could marry and even be buried together as spouses.

Nico wanted this trade deal to work out, so he could earn enough money to establish his own household in one of the more friendly neighborhoods in Athens or even go to Alexandria. He had always hoped to find a young man to join with him, and now he had found that young man.

Of course, the gods had a sense of humor. Sam was married and his wife was expecting a child.

Sam was honorable. He wouldn't abandon his wife or child. As jealous as Nico felt when he thought of Sam's wife, he knew that he had rescued the girl from destitution after her father had been killed. Sam, when he was only a boy, had been gallant enough to pledge himself to a girl to save her. That endeared him to Nico more than it alienated him.

As much as he didn't want to awaken Sam, he couldn't help but caress Sam's golden hair. Sam moaned a little and shifted in his sleep, and then his eyes fluttered open and he looked up at Nico and smiled.

"I thought maybe I had been dreaming," whispered Sam.

Nico leaned down and kissed him. "If you are, I'm glad to be in your dream."

Sam laughed and he turned and embraced Nico. Nico gathered Sam into his arms. Sam's skin was so warm and smooth, and his body so firm, Nico felt gripped a feeling that was somewhat surprising. He wanted Sam's company. Companionship. It was an unusual feeling to have for a social equal.

Sam smiled. "I know it's not a dream. My dreams aren't even this much fun."

Nico inhaled, "So, no regrets? No Roman...angst? Romans tend to be really uptight about things like this."

Sam looked up at Nico. "Tell me about it. For all that I am a citizen, I am not a Roman, any more than I expect you are."

Nico laughed and closed his eyes. "My mother is Roman but I'm Greek. Something which I thank the God for nearly every day." He pulled Sam close.

"So you think of Eros as a tall handsome man and not a fat child?" asked Sam.

Nico laughed. "Why the Romans made that change I'll never know. I'd much rather take an arrow from our version of the god."

Sam nodded. “On that I agree, and I’m glad he’s shot both of us.”

Nico looked at him. “You think that?”

Sam blinked and turned away. “Well, maybe...”

“Good,” assumed Nico. “We’re agree again.”

.

Chapter Fourteen

Sam had changed into his finest toga, and he was about to head to the atrium where he would greet the arriving guests, including Nico. Before he could, Eolus burst into his room and grinned at him.

“I hear you went above and beyond the call of duty to your family last night,” □ he said amiably. “I can’t say I’m surprised, as it was doubtful a young Greek could resist your...’

“Don’t say anything else,” replied Sam as he blushed. He was angry at himself for not remembering Eolus had spies in Nico's household. However, it seemed that Eolus was pleased with the situation. The fact that Eolus was even sensitive enough to realize what might happen surprised Sam. Eolus’s sexual interests were exclusively directed toward young women, so he had never used Sam as many Roman men in his position would have. In fact, by adopting Sam, Eolus had granted Sam patrician status and the protection of the law so no man had ever dared touch Sam, as the penalty for it would have been death.

This, however, did not stop Eolus from being aware of Sam’s physical gifts and believing, as most Romans did, that it brought luck to the household.

“I don't wish to speak about private matters between Nico and myself, except to say that we have become friends,”□ said Sam casually.

“Friends that kept his slaves awake into the night with their outbursts. I’m judging. You’re without your sweet Lilli, so why not take what the Greek offered you? I’m sure you made him happy. My spy assures me he’s been whistling most of the day.”

Sam inhaled. If Eolus knew the whole truth, Sam would never hear the end of it.

“Father,” □ breathed Sam, “I beg of you not to say anything to make the Greek feel self-conscious tonight. He’s quite shy, and I doubt he’ll be one to take your barbs in good humor. Nor will he be happy you have a spy in his house.”

Eolus nudged Sam’s arm. “I’ll not say a word. I’ve seated him next to your mutual cousin Sabina. She needs a distraction, and I hear he is quite handsome. Maybe she’ll set her sights on him as a husband and not do anything that might enrage your mother.” □

Sam sighed, having nearly forgotten the surreptitious courtship between Sabina and Eolus, and that Eolus still pretended he was uninterested in Sabina. That would make the evening even more complicated.

“All I wish, Father," said Sam, “Is that we survive the evening and that our guest goes away happy.’

Sam just hoped it wasn’t too much to wish for.

Chapter Fifteen

Nico lounged on a couch at the end of a series of long tables in the Domus Hadius. His dining partner was his cousin, Sabina, who was wearing a stunning dress of eastern silk and had her hair trussed up in elaborate braids and curls that must have taken her women most of the day to do. Sam had gossiped to Nico that Sabina meant to be Eolus's second wife, and Nico couldn't help but notice that while she was plenty flirtatious with him, her eyes kept finding Sam's handsome father across the room.

Meanwhile, Sam's mother, who was lying next to Eolus's elderly father, kept glaring at Sabina. Sam was across from Nico, lying in between Sabina's and Eolus's younger brothers, Titus and Marcus. Both of them were busy teasing Sam about his impending fatherhood, but Nico also noticed that Marcus kept looking longingly at Sabina.

Nico kept staring at Marcus, and he was wondering if Marcus remembered their meeting. About halfway through the first course, he had his answer.

"I almost didn't recognize you without your black eye, friend," said Marcus.

"You're looking less bedraggled than last I saw you, friend," replied Nico.

Marcus grinned. "I was waiting for you to remember me."

This exchange got Sam's attention. "You two have met?"

Marcus grinned. "We had quite an adventure."

Sam stared at Marcus, and Nico found the look of jealousy and suspicion on his face adorable.

Marcus turned to the stern-looking patriarch seated next to him. "Father, remember when I told you about the Egyptian ship fire? This is the young Greek that saved me from my foolishness."

Maximus Hadius looked at Nico, and he nodded. “This is a good omen,” he said.

“What is?” A good omen, I mean?” interjected Sam.

Marcus grinned and told of his near drowning, and as he told it, Nico had been his hero that day. By the end of Marcus’s tale, he had painted Nico as selfless, dashing and nearly god-like. Nico reminded himself to thank Marcus at a later time.

“The truth of the matter is I did what anyone in my position would have done,” said Nico, who was fascinated that the young man he’d rescued was Sam’s good friend and adopted uncle.

Marcus was handsome, resembled his half-brother and father, and apparently old man Hadius had settled some land and money on him. Marcus also seemed kinder than Eolus, at least to Nico. He thought maybe his cousin Sabina ought to set her sights there, rather than try for the heir apparent, especially since Marcus kept glancing over at Sabina with unconcealed adoration.

Nico found the meal quite impressive as well, with a mixture of venison, fish stew, songbirds and even some exotic fruit that he had never even seen, let alone eaten. The bread was also excellent, and it was served warm.

Nico did his best not to keep casting his eyes over at Sam, who looked so handsome in his toga as he chatted amiably with their cousin Titus and occasionally tried to rope Nico into the conversation.

Nico, on the other hand, felt Titus’s eyes on himself. Not in a lustful way, but in a way that said: “I wonder if he will marry my sister and spare me the trouble she’s trying to get in”. Nico sighed. His mother and father had suggested he be open to the idea of Sabina as a potential wife for himself, and he had avoided the subject.

He looked at Sabina, and he thought even if he was inclined toward a woman and for all her beauty and wealth, his cousin seemed like trouble. She was the specific kind of trouble that

came when a girl was intelligent, beautiful and had nothing to do all day but worry about her own advancement.

Sabina took a bite of a songbird and leaned over to him. “You know, Aunt Sabina wrote me that you were coming. The letter arrived only days before you did. She said you're sensitive but no pushover in business, and that you need a wife.”

Nico spread some goat cheese on a piece of bread. “My mother says the same to any young woman of a good family and with a dowry. I prefer to remain unmarried, as she well knows.”

Sabina batted her eyelashes. “She was very fond of my father,” she replied. “She says there’s a lot of your namesake in you.”

Nico nodded. “I find that flattering. You know I was with him at Actium or at least near his ship. He stayed at our house a few weeks before the battle. He was kind to my brothers and myself and told amusing stories. I wish he had been on our ship, as then he might be here to see how you outshine all the women here tonight.”

Nico watched Sabina’s face change. The coquettish facade disappeared, and Sabina seemed genuinely interested. “He used to read me stories about Troy when I was little. Said he hoped I would grow up to be more like Andromache than Helen, but then again it was Helen that lived a long life.”

Nico smiled. “But that was mere fate, not a function of Helen’s superiority. I agree with Uncle Nico that you should aspire to be Andromache. In fact, he mentioned you to me once. I think I was too young to see what he was getting at, but he probably had the same thought as my mother.”

Sabina looked over at Titus. “The same thought my little brother is having right now.”

Nico heard a sharpness in her voice. It couldn't be easy to be the older sister, and as bright as Sabina, and yet be subject to her younger brother's dominion.

"Shall we give him false hope by appearing to be smitten with one another?" asked Nico. "As a bonus, it might make many of the other men here jealous."

Sabina smirked. "I expect it will make all the men here jealous, except for dear Sammius of course."

Nico didn't know what to respond to that remark, so he took a sip of wine.

"He only has eyes for his dear Lilliana. That's been true since we were children, playing at being grown up in the gardens. She's a lucky woman, for he is good natured and is very kind and attentive."

Nico took a bit of his bread and chewed it slowly. "What is she like? I've heard of her beauty, of course. Is she kind-hearted?"

Sabina rolled her eyes. "She is mostly kind, but I would say also a bit...well, she's a plebe. Her father was one of the new men that Julius Caesar appointed to political office in Gaul. He was said to be coarse, but he was also very rich. Their house in Nardo was apparently as big as this one...perhaps bigger. She can be naive and insecure. I daresay I'm glad she's not here tonight. She tends to follow Sam around like a loyal she-hound, not wanting to speak to anyone else."

Sabina's words stung. Sam was Lilli's world, and she was obviously very attached to him. This thought saddened him greatly, as she was innocent in this. Finding out her husband was in love with another would break the girl's heart.

Just then, Sam had sat up on the couch where he had been lying and grabbed some cheese that had been out of his reach. Nico found it charming that Sam didn't bother waiting for a slave to fetch what he wanted.

Nico was about to ask more questions when he felt something against his bare foot under the table. He looked over at Sam, who was chatting with Marcus, but Nico realized Sam's toe was caressing the inside of Nico's foot.

"Gentlemen," said Sabina suddenly, "You're neglecting our guest of honor. Here I am chatting with him about women's concerns when I'm sure he'd rather talk about chariot races and gladiator matches."

Sam grinned. "Nico and I saw races yesterday."

This got Marcus's attention. "Did you wager? How well did you do?"

Sam smiled. "We didn't actually. Nico feels as a visitor to our fair city, he would be at a disadvantage because he doesn't know the racers."

Marcus smiled and popped a grape into his mouth. "You're a wise man and one that can show restraint. If you can resist the pressure to bet, my brother is going to have a tough time pushing you into an unfair agreement."

Nico smiled. "There will be nothing unfair about the deal. I only wish for everyone to get rich."

"Well said, young man," said Eolus who clearly had keen ears and was listening. "Tomorrow, you and I shall sit down with the lawyers and begin negotiations. I have it on Augustus's authority that he favors the deal between our two families."

Nico searched his face for a reaction to the conversation about the trade. Sam seemed to think that Augustus had probably told several Roman families the same thing. In fact, Nico had received invitations from two other families to dine with them that week.

Nico realized that he had been drinking wine for several hours, and hadn't visited the latrine. He excused himself and was led outside to the rather clean facilities that were in the back of the house's courtyard garden.

It was a clear night and there was a wind to take care of the smog the often covered the city, and he saw the stars above. He found himself looking at the different positions in the sky, only slightly but from his astronomy lessons he could tell he was far more north than he had ever been. It had been enjoyable to track this progress on his journey.

He watched the stars, but he also watched as Marcus appeared, and stumbled into the facilities and then out again.

"There you are," said Marcus. "The man of the hour. Had we only known back in Ostia that the fates had brought us together for a reason." Marcus threw an amiable arm about Nico, and Nico smiled awkwardly. "Titus thinks he's found a respectable husband for Sabina in you. Of course, I doubt that will happen...I saw the way you were looking at Sam tonight. My brother sent him to you, you know, suspecting that you might have Greek habits."

Nico winced at this. Nico was also worried exactly what Marcus knew.

"Marcus," whispered Nico. "That isn't quite..."

"You've treated me kindly all evening, bastard that I am. No veiled remarks. No cool rebuffs. Do you know how rare that is? Besides, who cares how a man gets his pleasure as long as nobody is harmed...and no more bastards created."

Nico sighed. The remark was kind, and Nico sensed truthfulness in him. He also was unnerved by the idea that Eolus sent Sam to him as bait. He was about to ask details, but he was interrupted.

“That’s big of you, Marcus,” said a voice as Sam stepped out of the shadows. “I wish Eolus had told me what he intended beforehand. I only thought I was to take Nico out to the brothels and the races. I didn’t know that Eolus meant for me to be the whore.”

Marcus rolled his eyes. “Eolus is in no position to judge.”

Nico walked over to stand next to Sam. “I can assure you that Sam has only ...”

Marcus shook his head and gestured for Nico to stop speaking. “I’ve met you twice, and I can already see you’re a terrible liar. The two of you have been eye fucking all night. I’ve known Sam since we were boys, and nobody is as-as faithful a husband and as perfect a gentleman as he. Unless he’s simply disinclined to women.” Sam looked annoyed.

“I’ve enjoyed Lilli’s bed,” breathed Sam.

“Oh come on, Sam. I’ve known you long enough...you’ve never judged me for being a bastard, either. That makes the only two people who never have standing right here in this garden. I swear, my brother won’t find out from me.”

Sam sighed. “That’s big of you, but he already knows we’re lovers. He’s got a spy or spies in Nico’s house. We were indiscrete last night.”

Nico closed his eyes. He should have known. “Sam...”

Sam shook his head. “He doesn’t know details, and I prefer to keep it that way. All he cares about is that I make you happy...and I hope you know I didn’t do...I didn’t do it because...”

Marcus looked at Sam with incredulousness. “Everyone knows you’re not a whore, Sam.” He turned to Nico. “Sam hates Eolus and hates my father. Their troops killed his real father and they killed his kind stepfather. He wouldn’t fuck man or woman or goat to help them, even with that impressive cock of his. Was Nico your first man, Sam? Because the bathhouse boys have been throwing themselves after you for as long as I can recall, and you’ve always ignored them...god, we nearly couldn’t convince you to come to a brothel before your wedding night. We only talked him into it because he wanted to know how to please Lilli.”

Sam blushed as he looked at Nico, and they locked eyes. Nico still couldn’t get over how blue they were. “He’s the first. I love Lilli, but I love him, too,” whispered Sam.

Marcus laughed agreeably. “That’s so Gaulish. Nico, you do know Gauls believe that the sexual act can bond two souls together. They don’t go around sticking their dicks everywhere.”

“Plenty of Gallic men stick their dicks everywhere,” breathed Sam. “but it is true, there’s a romantic streak in us. My true father was devoted to my mother and faithful and believed himself bonded to her. I always admired that.”

Sam’s words made Nico warm inside, then chilled him. If such stories were true, then he and Sam had bonded together...not just the night before, but from the moment they laid eyes on each other.

Marcus laughed. “You always have been a romantic, but you’re also married. What are you going to do? You won’t be able to hide this from Lilli, she knows you as well, better than me.”

Sam sighed. “I haven’t a clue.”

As if the fates had willed it, Nico heard a woman’s scream. Sam looked shocked and then scared. “That’s her.”

Marcus grabbed Sam's arm and turned to Nico. "It must be time. Her rooms aren't far."

All thoughts of the future drained away at that moment, as Nico followed Sam and Marcus back toward the dining room. Sam's mother, Jacquetta, greeted them. She was a small woman, but she seemed to be about eight feet tall standing there, with folded arms and hair that appeared like a golden halo atop her head. She spoke firmly to her son.

"I see my daughter-in-law's lungs are good enough that I need not tell you it's time. Eolus has stronger wine waiting for you in the courtyard, from his private stock. You can wait there for word from the midwives. Bring your friends along. It might be a long time."

Nico looked at the mixture of fear and joy on Sam's face, and he couldn't be angry or even sad that this was Sam's life. Sam was to be a father if the child lived, and that was a gift from the gods.

"Come," said Marcus. "Tonight's a night for women's work, while we men will do what real men have done for centuries on nights like this. We shall get drunk."

Nico grinned, and the three of them headed into the courtyard.

Chapter Sixteen

Sabina had been patiently waiting for Nico to return, and she couldn't help but wonder what he was talking to Marcus and Sam about out in the back garden. She would have given anything to have been able to go find them in the garden, but it would have been considered unseemly.

Still, she had considered bringing Kaia and Aya with her out to the back garden, if only to escape the blistering gaze of Jacquetta, who no doubt had noticed the looks her husband had been giving Sabina.

Sabina didn't feel sorry for her. All of Rome knew of the lust Eolus had for Jacquetta, and how he had pursued her and promised her the world. It wasn't enough that she become his mistress, but he wanted her to be the mother of his children. It may have taken the suspicious death of her second husband, but Jacquetta finally relented.

Once the quarry is captured, a man's lust cools. Everyone knew that. Jacquetta was lucky she held his attention for eight years. Her children were Hadiuses. Even if he divorced her, it was unlikely that Eolus would let his children's mother starve. She would be fine, and she would be free. Jacquetta should, frankly, be grateful to Sabina.

Sabina was about to get up and call for her brother to take her home when she heard a commotion. A slave came and whispered in Jacquetta's ear, and Eolus's wife got up with only a short word to her husband.

After she was gone, Eolus's smiled and lifted his goblet. "It seems my wife's first grandchild is about to make his appearance."

Sabina swallowed her last bit of wine and got up from the table. She followed after Jacquetta, down the hallway to where a group of women had gathered outside a door.

"Will the labor be long?" asked Sabina.

“Hours, my lady,” said one of the midwives.

“She is my friend,” said Sabina. “I wish to visit her.”

It wasn't a question. Sabina walked past the women and into the bedroom. It was a big room that had been prepared with a hard couch for the labor, a soft bed for the recovery and a wooden birthing stool for the actual event.

Lilli stood in the middle of the room, wearing a simple dress and her hair down around her shoulders. Her belly protruded out and despite her earlier screaming, she didn't look terribly distressed. She did appear puzzled to see Sabina.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Surely you knew I was invited to dinner,” replied Sabina.

Just then, a black and white kitten brushed against Sabina's legs. It was an adorable little thing, and it meowed softly.

“This is Cleopatra,” breathed Lilli. “She takes care that no vermin invade my room.”

Sabina knelt down and petted the kitten. “She's adorable, and she looks every inch a queen.”

Lilli laughed. “Sam named her. I would not have been so brave as to give her the name of an enemy of Rome.”

“You're brave in your own way,” replied Sabina. “How do you feel? Scared?”

Lilli smiled. “A bit. I know what happened to your mother and so many others, but I also wish to meet my child. The fates will do what they do. I'm also looking forward to not resembling a cow anymore.”

Sabina would have agreed, but in truth, Lilli looked radiant and very little like a cow. Her body had taken the pregnancy well.

“You look well, and you know I wouldn’t say that if it wasn’t a lie. I think you’ll get your figure back quickly,” said Sabina.

“Thank you,” said Lilli. “Did anything interesting happen at the party?”

“You mean beyond your scream echoing through the whole house? My Adonis cousin is visiting from Greece, and my brother wishes me to marry him. I came to meet him.”

Lilli let out a heavy breath. “What does Marcus think of that?”

Sabina’s mouth dropped open at the impertinent question. “Whatever do you mean?”

Lilli placed her hand on her back and began walking a bit around the room. It had the effect of circling Sabina, who picked up Cleopatra and cuddled her.

“You’ve loved Marcus since we were children,” breathed Lilli. “Your left eye twitches every time you say he’s beneath you and that you could never love him. Your eye twitches like that whenever you say you’re happy for me. Your eye doesn’t twitch like that when you say I’m lucky to be married to Sam. It doesn’t twitch like that when you say you wish your father was alive. That twitch is a sure sign if you’re being truthful or not.”

Sabina blinked and petted the kitten. She had no idea she could be so easily read. Her lip started to quiver, and to her horror, she began choking back tears.

Lilli inhaled. “I understand. I would have been angry if the fates been so cruel as to make my Sam out of my reach.”

Sabina didn’t have an answer. She couldn’t answer, but she suddenly felt very much like Lilli wasn’t as dull-witted as she had thought she was. Impulsively, she moved toward Lilli and put an arm around her and squeezed her. If it weren’t for Lilli’s belly and the kitten in Sabina’s hand, she would have fully hugged her.

“You will make a wonderful mother,” said Sabina. “Your child has been blessed already.”

Lilli looked at Sabina with a slight bit of skepticism at the compliment, but she smiled.

“I wish Sam were here,” said Lilli. “If only for him to see what pain I must suffer to bring our child into this world.”

Sabina put Cleopatra down and the kitten scurried under the couch. “If it were any other man, including Marcus, I would say he would be too cowardly to face it. Sam might actually be able to withstand it. It’s the barbarian in him.”

Lilli started to breathe in quick short bursts, and then she clutched her belly and screamed in pain. Sabina took her hand and led her to the couch.

“They say it’s going to be hours,” said Sabina.

Lilli nodded and clutched Sabina’s hand. “My mother is dead. Jacquetta is unkind. Could you stay with me?”

Sabina felt tears start to well up again but she held them back. She placed her free hand over Lilli’s.

“I’ll stay as long as you need me,” she said. She meant the words.

Chapter Seventeen

Sam squinted and he thought maybe there was a fire, but then he realized that morning had broken and bright sun was bathing the courtyard of the Domus Hadius. He lay prostrate on the floor, and he felt a warm hand on his bare ass. His toga had clearly ridden up in the night. He turned, expecting - hoping it was Nico's hand only to awkwardly realize it was Marcus's. He wondered where Nico was until he heard the sound of retching.

Sam looked up, and he saw Appius, the slave that had been assigned to prevent any of the young men from choking on their own vomit, holding Nico's head as he vomited into a bucket. As far as Sam knew, Nico hadn't vomited until this point, which was impressive. Sam had vomited twice already, and Marcus had vomited three times. Undiluted Roman wine was hard on the stomach, and it didn't mix well with..well, anything they had eaten.

Sam gently wriggled out from Marcus's embrace, and he heard Marcus mumble Sabina's name. Nico, who had finished vomiting and was on his knees laughed.

"Be careful," said Nico, "In the low light, you resemble our mutual cousin, and he seems quite sweet on her."

Sam sighed, and he felt a pang of pity for Marcus. The Sabina he knew would not marry a bastard, even if he had a fortune and was sired by one of the noblest houses in Rome. He stood up and brushed off and straightened his toga.

"Eolus's cook makes a blissful tonic for a hangover. Appius, go tell her we are in need of her medicine," said Sam.

Appius nodded. "Young Sammius, please summon me if one of you needs to retch again. I do not want to shirk my duties."

Sam nodded. "Of course, you've done your duty admirably tonight. I'll not let Marcus die while you are in the kitchen."

Marcus groaned, as if in response to this.

"No word from the midwives?" asked Nico.

"Apparently, not," replied Sam. "I suppose I'll be the last person they tell. I'm only the father." Sam was only partially joking. He had no doubt that his mother, Eolus, and Maximus would be informed of the birth before he would be.

"How long does it usually take?" asked Nico.

Sam shrugged. "My youngest sister took a full two days to arrive. The twins far less. One can't know."

Marcus got up on his hands and knees. "The babe better come before tonight," he groaned. "I cannot handle another night like this."

Sam grinned. "You say that every time you drink too much."

Marcus slowly struggled to get up. "I mean it every time."

The young men found their way inside from the courtyard and onto some low couches in the atrium. Appius soon brought them each a thick brew of vinegar with herbs and flowers from the kitchen.

"What's in this?" asked Nico. "In Greece, we take cabbage broth."

Sam sipped on his brew. "Nobody's sure exactly, but the cook swears by it. It works."

Nico looked skeptical, but he sipped on his as well.

At that moment, Sam's mother strode into the atrium. Sam stood up. "What word?" he asked nervously.

Jacquetta shook her head. “The labor progresses but it will be hours. You young men should go to the baths or something. You’re doing nothing but distracting the slaves with your presence.”

Sam was about to protest, but Marcus spoke. “Excellent idea,” he said. “What good is it to wait around here? If we go to the baths, you will be clean and relaxed to greet your child when he arrives.”

Nico stood up. “I agree,” he said. “There’s nothing for us to do here but get in the way.”

Sam wanted to say no, but he saw the logic in their suggestion. He didn’t want to greet his child looking like he had spent entire night drinking undiluted wine like he was some sort of barbarian.

The three young men walked to the Palatine baths where they stripped, took exercise, had massages and then swam in the public pool. They finally were redressed in fresh clothing and sat on a blanket on the green, where they had some wine that was diluted properly.

“You know,” said Nico, “many families in Greece have taken to educating their daughters the same as their sons. It’s said to make them better mothers when they are grown, as they can give their children lessons.”

Sam drank his wine and looked at the sky. “It will be a great responsibility, boy or girl. I hope I am up for it. I think I would like to teach my child his or her letters and read them epic tales of old.”

Marcus laughed. “And so you shall. I will teach him naughty poems, like a good uncle.”

Sam sighed, and he turned to Nico. “I need my own household. My mother will never let Lilli alone as long as we stay in that house. It won’t be good for the child.”

Nico nodded. “Hopefully, negotiations won’t take more than a few weeks.”

Sam was starting to be anxious, so he asked that they return to the house. Nico and Marcus agreed, and when they returned Jacquetta was in the atrium waiting.

“There you are,” she said grabbing him. “The child has come. She’s healthy and crying. Your wife came through the birth alive.”

Sam blinked and quickly stole a look at Nico, who was beaming, and he let his mother lead her to his bedroom where Lilli lay in the bed holding a swaddled babe.

“It’s a girl,” she said somewhat sadly. “I think she has eyes of the sky like yours.”

Sam grinned and stumbled toward them. “A girl? I was hoping for a girl.” Sam wasn’t just consoling her. The joy he felt when he heard it was a girl was real. He had wanted a girl, despite the custom. He had dreamed it several times, and the dream came true.

He looked at the little infant. She looked like his brother and sisters, and Lilli offered her to him.

“What shall we call her to distinguish her from her cousins?” she asked.

Sam looked at the little baby. Roman custom dictated she be called, Hadia, after his adopted family but Eolus had two daughters also called Hadia. Each of them had nicknames, Flavia Hadia and Jacquetta Hadia. Sam wanted to call this baby after her mother. Yet, she would still need a name that distinguished her from her mother. Romans never made naming simple, naming everyone after everyone else. In Gaul, they would have just named her something both parents found pleasing.

“She’ll be called Lilliana Hadia but maybe she can be called Lilah so you two will not be confused?” asked Sam, taking the newborn into his arms.

Lilli smiled at Sam, clearly pleased, and he felt a pang of guilt. She loved him in a way he could return, but he did love her, and he would see to it that his family would want for nothing

Chapter Eighteen

Sabina didn't know whether to praise the gods for their gifts or curse them for making childbirth such an ugly, messy affair. She hadn't expected to witness the birth but none of the midwives shooed her from the room. She kept thinking of her mother, who had died while giving birth to Titus, and she prayed that Lilli would not meet the same fate. She watched open-mouthed as her friend crouched on the stool, surrounded by three midwives, and birthed the babe.

When it arrived, little thing cried in a way that reminded Sabina of an alley cat, so much so that she checked to make sure Cleopatra wasn't making the sounds. Sabina watched as the two midwives bathed the child, and one midwife cleaned off Lilli and helped her to the bed. There was blood and other residue all over the sheets that had been laid out on the floor, and the excess was being mopped up by an elderly slave woman.

It was such a gruesome scene, Sabina began to lament she had not been chosen to become a Vestal Virgin. She had spent so much time and energy of late trying to find a husband, she had neglected to consider what that actually meant.

She watched as one midwife handed the baby to Lilli, who was swaddled in linens as though she herself was a baby.

"Sabina," she whispered, "it's a girl."

Sabina carefully approached the bed, and she watched as Lilli began to comfort and pet the child. "You live, and she lives," said Sabina. "It seems like the blessings of the gods are upon you."

Lilli, whose face had become less flushed, smiled. "Sam said it would be a girl. I didn't believe him. Remind me not to discount his dreams or discount the Gallic gods that he sometimes prays to."

Sabina smiled. "He'll be overcome with joy." It occurred to Sabina that someone ought to tell Sam his child had arrived. She turned to one of the slaves and barked an order to find him and give him the news or at least tell his mother, who would know his location so he could be told the news.

"Jacquetta will come soon and take her from me," said Lilli softly.

"Jacquetta can't feed her," replied Sabina. "You're going to feed her, right?" Many high-born women used wet nurses from among their slaves to feed their children, but Lilli was a plebe, and she and Sam owned no slaves of their own. So, it was a safe assumption that she would feed her child.

Lilli nodded. "I wish my own mother was here to tell me what to do."

Sabina felt herself tear up. She wished that her mother was alive, too.

"Jacquetta is good at caring for babes. She'll see to it I make no mistakes. She'd try and take her if I did," continued Lilli, "it's not the same as having my own mother."

Lilli put the child to her breast, and after a few tries, the child began to suckle. Sabina was fascinated. It was like the child just knew what to do.

"Does it hurt?" asked Sabina.

Lilli shook her head. "It feels strange but not really."

The door flew open, and Jacquetta burst into the room. She walked straight past Sabina, not even bothering to glare at her. She smiled at the baby.

"She looks a bit like Sam did when he was born," said the older woman with a genuine smile.

Sabina couldn't remember Jacquetta ever looking happy before, and she didn't want to ruin the moment. She carefully backed out of the room and into the hallway. She realized she

had been up all night, and she had no idea where her women had gone or where her brother and his entourage were.

She walked down the hall, through the atrium and made her way to the courtyard. Surely, she would see someone she knew. She needed to get to the baths and then home. She needed sleep badly.

“Good morning to the most beautiful woman in Rome,” said a deep voice.

She turned and saw Eolus and Marcus’s father, Maximus standing there. He had white hair and a Jupiter-like white beard, dark eyes and was tall and gaunt. He approached her, looking her up and down.

“I have consulted many oracles, and they all predict you will become my family, my dear,” he says. “What is not clear is which of my sons you will marry.”

Sabina looked him in the eye. He may have been the patriarch of a great family, but hers was greater. He had no right to leer at her.

“My brother gets the choice, not me,” she said smoothly. “His sights are on my Greek cousin. Neither he nor his family has even asked about my dowery, apparently.”

Maximus chuckled and sat down. “Surely, you don’t believe they aren’t aware of your wealth? You’d make their youngest son very rich and very respectable. It won’t happen, especially if he finds out about your correspondence with a married man.”

Sabina felt suddenly uncomfortable. She looked around, and she realized there were no slaves or servants to be seen. They were alone.

“Where is my brother? Where are my women? I have stayed too long,” she said.

Maximus stepped forward. “Marcus would have been kind to you, but you’re more like me, I’ll wager. You’re not sentimental. You will choose what advances you. You won’t choose a Greek fourth son. Since Augustus is not about to leave Livia, Eolus will be your choice.”

Maximus put his hand on her arm, and he gently ran his fingers over her arm in a way that made her shiver. She stepped back. She was so exhausted she couldn't think straight, and Maximus’s eyes were so cold. She couldn’t remember ever being alone with a man that wasn’t her father or brother, and she felt unnerved. She didn’t think Maximus would be so foolish as to harm her, but she wasn’t certain.

“I should go check on Lilli,” she said, feeling like the safest place to be would be among the women.

“She’s with Sam,” said another, familiar and comforting voice.

Marcus stood at the edge of the courtyard, with Nico appearing just after him. Sabina rushed to them.

“The baby is born,” she said quickly. “It’s a girl. Lilli lives.”

“Jacquetta told us,” replied Marcus gently taking her arm. “It seems you’ve been up all night. Come, let’s find your women and get you home safe.”

Marcus gently led her out of the courtyard and into the atrium. He helped her sit in one of the wooden chairs there.

“Her women are asleep in the back quarters,” said Appius, one the household slaves. “I will awaken them. Young Titus went home last night, so we can arrange an escort for you this morning.”

She nodded, grateful for the man’s assistance. “You do your masters credit,” she said, gazing at Marcus.

Marcus smiled softly. "You've had something of a night. Did you witness the birth?"

Sabina nodded, but she did not want to describe it. It was best the men did not know.

"The child has good lungs. I think she will have eyes like yours, but it's too early to tell, so they say."

Marcus smiled, and Sabina smiled back. He looked so happy.

"Perhaps my cousin needs a nap before heading out into the world," said Nico.

Sabina nodded. "I feel like I could fall asleep on my feet.

Marcus took her hand. "Come this way."

He led her down a hall and to a small chamber with a small bed. The door was wide open, and Nico followed them.

"You're safe here," said Marcus, "I'll not let anyone through the door besides your women."

This gallantry made Sabina smile as she crawled up on the small bed and kicked off her sandals. Marcus put a blanket over her.

Nico cleared his throat. "I'll not let anything happen to you, either. Remember, Sabina, you and I are kin and I owe it to see you are safe from all that would harm your honor."

Sabina wanted to sleep, but she looked into Marcus's eyes.

"You would never harm my honor, would you?" she asked Marcus.

He was still smiling, and in the low light of the chamber, she thought she detected a blush. He leaned over and kissed her on the lips. It was soft to begin with, but it jolted her tired body to life. She put her arms around his neck and opened her mouth. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, and she moved to pull him back. She had thought so much about this, read so much, she had seen drawings, see others kiss, but she had never experienced a kiss before.

It was far more intense than her lonely imaginings, and she wanted to continue, honor be damned.

But Marcus broke the kiss.

“Sleep, my love,” he said.

He tucked her into the bed, kissed her on the forehead and headed for the door.

“We’ll both stand guard until you awaken and you can be escorted home safely,” said Marcus.

She was going to reply, but she fell asleep.

Chapter Nineteen

It had been hours since the birth. Sam was with his wife and child, and Sabina had, after a substantial nap, left with her women and a few guards. Nico was in the courtyard again, with Marcus, who was pouring more wine, but this time it was diluted with honey.

“You look like you need more of the undiluted stuff, friend,” he said.

Nico took the goblet and drank. “I’m happy for him. I really am.”

Marcus snickered. “Of course you are, and you also know that he’s going to return to her for the child’s sake. If it’s any consolation, I’ve never seen him look at her the way he looks at you.”

Nico smiled into his goblet, and he was happy to have a new friend. Sam wasn’t the only decent man in the house.

“Well,” sighed Nico. “I will console myself by making us all rich, including you if you’re willing. Would you like to hear my plans? If they work, the beautiful Sabina might reconsider you as a suitor, so overflowing will your coffers be.”

Marcus grinned. “Please say the plan involves double crossing my brother and father.”

Nico laughed. “Mine too, friend.”

Nico proceeded to explain how he planned on taking a much bigger cut of the revenue by bypassing the Roman laws that prevented patricians from owning merchant craft and using smaller, faster craft that was the norm. Nico had helped design such craft, without his family’s knowledge. He just needed partners with the right contacts. Marcus knew his family’s middlemen, and Sam knew Augustus and could possibly obtain an ownership waiver for the ships.

“Now,” breathed Nico, “we need to figure out how to convince Titus to let you marry my cousin.”

Marcus looked up at the sky and made a groan of frustration. “We need to convince the lady herself, as well. One blessed-by-the-gods kiss when she’s exhausted and scared won’t change her mind.”

Nico leaned over. “Speaking of which, we never got to ask her what your father said to her that made her look so meek and frightened. I don’t know her well, but I know the look of someone who’s frightened.”

Marcus inhaled. “My father has always frightened me, and he loves me. My sense is he loves Sabina’s money, and she’s right to be frightened of that.”

Nico saw that Marcus’s normally jovial expression had turned sorrowful and worried. “Do you think Eolus will leave Sam’s mother?”

This question wasn’t just out of curiosity or worry for Sabina. If Sam were suddenly to be charged with caring for his high-strung mother, that would complicate an already difficult situation.

“Eolus’s passion for Jacquetta may have cooled, but it’s not extinguished,” replied Marcus. “My brother is dithering. If he really wanted Sabina, he would have divorced Jacquetta by now. He’s simply amusing himself, mentally dallying her the way he physically dallies with the slaves.”

Nico shook his head. Sabina was his cousin, and he didn’t like the idea of a man like Eolus toying with her. He had to help her. He had to for his mother, for Sam and most importantly, for his new friend Marcus.

Vita

Melissa Nurczynski holds a B.A. from Wellesley College in England and an M.A. from The Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars in Narrative Nonfiction. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Professional Writing/English at Kutztown University where she teaches Magazine Writing, Travel Writing, Arts & Entertainment Writing and other classes.

Melissa has published numerous magazine articles in a wide variety of publications including *Newsweek*, *Budget Travel*, *Atlas Obscura*, *The Houston Chronicle*, *US Airways Magazine* and many others.

Melissa is a member of the International Society of Literary Journalism Studies and the Association of Journalism and Mass Communication.

Typist: melissa.nurczynski@gmail.com