

ASSAPH MEHR



MURDER IN ABSENTIA



PURPLE TOGA PUBLICATIONS

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This novel is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental — with the notable exception of a few long dead Greek and Roman artists and philosophers.

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*Dedicated to my lovely wife, Julia,
without whom this book would never be,
and Felix would still be just a tabby cat.*

FOREWORD

This book is born of love of both fantasy and ancient Rome, with a hardboiled detective thrown in.

I have always been fascinated by ancient history and, in particular, Rome, from the time I was in primary school and first got my hands on *Asterix*. This was exacerbated when my parents took me on a trip to Italy — I whinged horribly when they dragged me to “yet another church with baby angels on the ceiling”, yet was happy to skip all day around ancient ruins. Life took a few twists and turns, but a few years ago I randomly picked a copy of Lindsay Davis’ Marcus Didius Falco novels in a used book fair. I fell in love with Rome all over again, this time from the viewpoint of a cynical adult.

The backdrop for this novel is the city of Egretia. It is a fantasy setting as I did not wish to be constrained to a particular period in Roman history, with its associated people and troubles. Instead, the setting borrows heavily from a thousand years of Roman republic and empire eras as well as other exotic places of the period, such as Alexandria. I have appropriated many Latin terms, using and abusing them for this fantasy world. Most, I hope, can be understood from the text, but a glossary and some notes at the end should help elucidate.

Lastly, I want to offer my thanks to the people who encouraged

and helped me with this book. First and foremost my wife and inspiration, Julia. My friends and family who acted as editors — Ramit Mehr and her husband, Eric Klein, and my friends Alex Abrate, Boaz Karni and Lipakshi and Rakesh Das. This novel would not have been as good without you.

I hope you enjoy reading this novel as much as I did writing it.

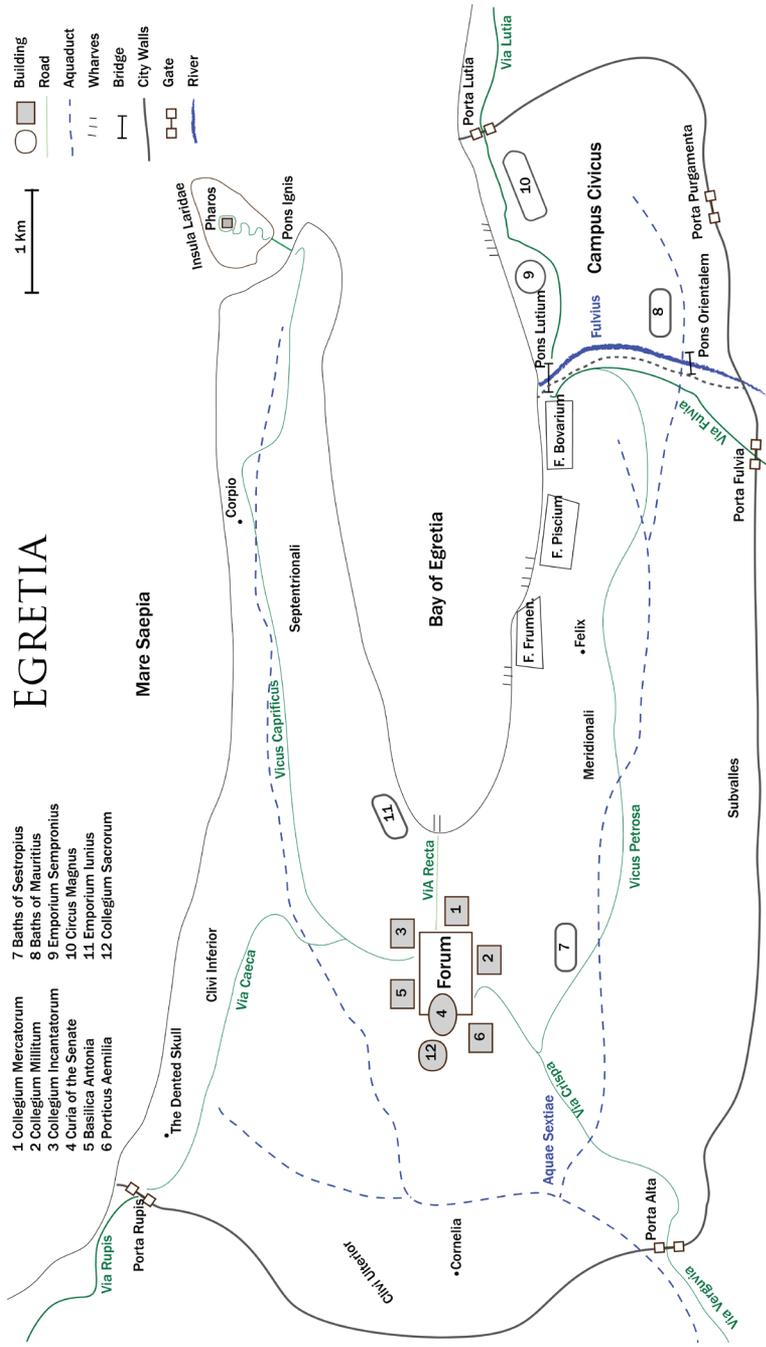
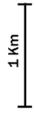
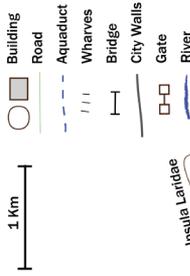
Assaph Mehr
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MAPS

High-resolution maps — as well as an expanded glossary, short stories and more — can be found at www.egretia.com.

EGRETIA

- 1 Collegium Mercatorum
- 2 Collegium Militium
- 3 Collegium Incantatorum
- 4 Curia of the Senate
- 5 Basilica Antonia
- 6 Porticus Aemilia
- 7 Baths of Sestropius
- 8 Baths of Mauritius
- 9 Emporium Sarmpronius
- 10 Circus Magnus
- 11 Emporium Iunius
- 12 Collegium Sacrorum



ASSAPH MEHR

SCROLL I - CAESO

CHAPTER I

Walking through the dense wood I could hardly see the ground, for the faint moonlight did not penetrate the canopy of trees and a thick white mist was curling around my legs, obscuring roots. I tripped and fell, got up, walked on. Vague glimpses in rare breaks amidst branches offered me faint stars that were not enough to show me direction. Before me, around me, behind me, between the trees, all I saw was the fog. I kept walking, avoiding branches and roots, drawn inexorably towards my unwanted destination.

The clearing.

I slowed as I walked out from between the trees, taking careful steps across the moonlit grass. At the clearing's edges, out of the corner of my eye I saw what I thought was moonlight reflecting in eyes, the sheen of purple-black fur, but whenever I turned I saw only grey-white mist and leaves.

I edged to the middle of the clearing. The grass looked like brittle shards of silver in this light.

In front of me loomed a well. I knew that was where my destination lay, the reason for my being here.

I walked over to it. I placed my hands on the stones of its sill and turned my head to look up to the stars. I stared at them and they blinked back at me coldly.

I steeled myself to face the well. Face what was inside it. That

was why I was drawn here. To make me confront the thing down its depths.

I didn't want to, but I had to. I circled the well, so that I would not obstruct the moonlight, let it shine on its contents.

I turned my gaze down and saw the armless, legless body floating in the well, face down. As I was looking at it, it bobbed and flipped around and I could see the bloated and decomposed flesh, the scars marring the marble breast, its face deformed, the stare in its vacant right eye, the maggots eating away the left eye-socket and through the cheek, and even through all the ravages and the filtered moonlight I recognised her...

I am certain the neighbours heard my scream as I sat up in bed.

"Dascha!" I cried, "Dascha, you old crone, where are you when I need you?"

No use. Deaf as a dead donkey when she sleeps, that one. I should have sold her years ago, however no one would pay me for that useless old bat. Besides, she was the last living reminder I had of my parents.

I got up in search of water to wash my face. Not being one to insist on social graces, I stumbled naked out of my sleeping cubicle and into the peristyle garden. I shoved my head under the cool fountain waters. Head cleared of cobwebs, I looked up and saw the rampant faun grinning madly at me as it peed fresh water down on me. That statue at the top of the fountain was the work of a nameless artist, and rightly so. The upper body of a man, the legs of a goat, a mad look in his eyes, set above a leering grin. The right hand holding high a lyre, the left clutching at a member that would make Priapus envious. My father's impeccably horrendous taste in interior decor.

Day had dawned. Dascha must have gone down to the markets for fresh bread and produce for the day. I went to the kitchen, raided it for some old crusts and went to my study. I looked at my desk and saw the open scroll by Nikander, cataloguing and establishing a taxonomy of venomous monsters, with a plate with leftovers of last night's chicken in fish sauce on one side and an empty wine goblet on the other holding it open. Those must have been responsible for my night terrors

and I was in no mood to pursue them further, even in the daylight.

I decided instead to immerse myself in the memoirs of Plautus. His life, according to him, was even more farcical than his plays. Nothing high-brow about him, all foreign kings and concubines, indigestion and inebriation.

* * *

Dascha ambled into my study, bringing me out of my reverie. “A visitor, *domine*,” she announced with her croaky voice. “Of the paying kind.”

It was mid-morning by then, the sounds of the city in full swing around me. Dascha must have returned from her shopping and busied herself with the sundries of household maintenance while I had been reading. Most people have a door slave, a large burly type to intimidate potential visitors and deter the less savoury element of society from making a forced entry. I had Dascha. This has proved sufficient on three counts — first, I had no money to pay for a proper door slave. Second, with Dascha giving her one-eye-squinting stare, naught but the most stout of heart would do anything except mumble and move away. Third, in my line of business a crone is akin to good credentials. Even a fake crone.

“Well, show him into my study, and then come help me into my toga,” I said.

When I walked back into my study, dressed appropriately to do business, I saw before me a fidgety young man. He looked apprehensively over his shoulder, as Dascha was eyeing him with a slight mad drool.

“Dascha, bring us some wine and cold water,” I dismissed her. I walked around my desk and sat in my backless chair, indicating to my guest to do the same in the client’s chair in front.

“My *dominus* would like to hire your services,” he began as soon as he sat down. “The matter is private and urgent, and my master will be willing to pay for your time. If you would come with me, I will take

you to him right now.”

I looked him over. Dressed in a plain tunic made of good fabric, with a circular embroidery outlining a fish and an *amphora* on the left side of his chest. Healthy looking. Soft hands. A scribe or secretary, wearing his master’s insignia.

“So what does one of our esteemed *rhones* want from me?” He didn’t register any surprise, so my guess must have been correct.

“I have only been asked to fetch you, Felix the Fox. *Dominus* did not authorise me to discuss details; however, the matter is important. My master will pay well.”

‘He can afford to,’ I thought, ‘being one of the fifteen *rhones* elected this year to administer Egretia.’

Dascha appeared in the doorway carrying a tray with a silver jug of wine and a jug of cold water. She set it on my desk, and I offered my visitor the refreshments.

“Well watered, if you please,” he replied, resignedly.

“There are some things we need to discuss before I will accept your master’s summons. Let’s start with your name and your master’s name.”

“My name is Typheus, and I serve his most excellent Marcus Quinctius Corpio, *Rbonus Piscium*.”

“And what does the Rhone of Fish need from me? Surely he has access to all the resources of the Collegium Mercatorum, and, one would hazard, to those of the other collegia as well.”

“That, as I explained, you will have to hear from my master’s lips alone.”

“What can you tell me, then, to satisfy my curiosity and assure me I will not be wasting my time?” Not that I had better plans for the day, but I could smell good money coming my way.

“Really, the matter is of utmost importance to my dominus. It is personal and does not concern his position of Rhone of Fish. It is also urgent.” He looked like he hadn’t gotten much sleep the night before. “Please come,” he pleaded.

“Very well, I will go with you if you agree to my terms.” I quoted him double my usual rate and added “plus expenses.” He acknowledged it without a blink.

“Let’s go,” I said, finishing my wine and wishing I had tripled my rates.

* * *

We took the alley down from my house to the Road of Unsavory Smells, or as it is more commonly known, the Street of Cheese Makers. My house, you see, lies on the Meridionali, the Southern of the two arms of Vergu that make the Bay of Egretia. Not the more fashionable Septentrionali, the Northern arm, or the ludicrously rich slopes of Vergu itself, but still high enough from the docks and meat markets on the bay shores to be considered decent.

Typheus walked ahead in a brisk pace, taking me further down the hill and angling towards the Forum at the head of the bay. He walked confidently through the warren of alleys that lead down to the water, rather than going the long way by the Vicus Petrosa, the main road that runs along the ridge of the Meridionali behind my house.

We reached the shores of the bay and walked along the embankment, with its wharves and storehouses, towards the Forum Egretium.

“So tell me, Typheus, what kind of man is your master?”

“A good man, quicker of mind than of temper. And right now, a very distraught man, one whom I would gladly see served well.”

“And the place we are going to?”

“His *domus*.”

Not the talkative type. Or maybe just loyal, which is why he was entrusted with the errand of fetching me.

When we reached the head of the bay with its official navy wharves, instead of heading towards the Forum we turned right and continued to walk next to the water, passing between the wharves and the Collegium Mercatorum. We were heading towards the Septentrionali, rather than up the slopes of Mons Vergu. Most *rhones*, even the lesser *rhones* like Corpio, would be rich enough to own houses on the high slopes, above the Forum. Some, however, preferred not to remain too close to their colleagues, or to keep close to the business districts,

or even just to remain in their quiet ancestral houses.

We went past the Emporium Iunius and climbed up the Septentrionali, joining the Vicus Caprificus to walk along the ridge of the hill that runs throughout the Northern arm of the bay. The neighbourhood changed gradually as we ascended, from wharves and silos and porticos of merchants and artisans, to mansions of increasing size. The further up we went, the longer the distances between side alleys and doorways, and the fewer the features on the walls facing the street.

This being early in the month of *Avrilis* right after the spring equinox, and the day still young, I did not mind the walk. It gave me both plenty of fresh air and a chance to think about what business might a *rhone* have for such as me.

I tried again.

“How is the Rhone’s health these days?”

“His excellency is a man in his prime and in excellent health.”

“And his business?” I added, “This past winter has been mild, no storms to speak of.”

“His business is prosperous, as always. The new-season cuttlefish are now in the market, the people are happy, and his year in public office is off to a good start.”

“A personal matter, then.”

“A most personal one, indeed.”

“His wife...?”

“My mistress has been dead these past seven years,” he said with a stony face. “Please, let us just get to my master, and he will explain the matter to your satisfaction.”

I gave up and resolved to enjoy the walk and the view.

* * *

We reached Corpio’s *domus*. It was located past the crest of Septentrionali on the cliffs side, away from the noise and smells of the markets around the lower shores of the bay. On a clear day like today, from the houses at the very top of the hill one can see the whole

city — the bay with the Port of Egretia and its wharves, surrounded by rising slopes of red tiles on the other side and going up the mountain; to the north one can see the wide blue sea. Almost as importantly, from up here one cannot see the squalor and misery of lower Egretia, or smell the cramped humanity with its life of markets, cooking and refuse that lie beyond the crest of the Meridionali away from the bay.

Corpio's mansion presented an unassuming facade to the street. A blank wall, painted in muted russet colours. A large oaken door with brass knobs and lashes was set deep in the wall, flanked by tall cypresses on both sides. A tile painted with the family crest of fish and *amphora* was set into the wall next to the door. Typheus knocked politely, and a small slit opened up and closed a second later. The heavy door swung inwards.

"Please wait here," said Typheus, "as I go and announce you to my master."

I remained as told in the vestibule. Through the open doorway, I could see a large atrium flanked with columns, with corridors and doorways running further in. The natural light filtered through the open roof and shimmered on the shallow pool filled with goldfish and embedded with mosaics depicting sea life. The columns around were painted turquoise, and the reflected light dancing upon them gave a feeling of an underwater grotto. 'This must be his ancient family home,' I decided, as the effect was too refined to be anything less.

Typheus returned. "Follow me, please," he said, and led me through the house to his master's study, gestured me inside and then followed me in and closed the door.

Though I knew of him, as I followed the forum gossip about all our elected *rhones*, this was the first time I had encountered Corpio in person. It pays to keep abreast of the movers and shakers, though I find it best to stay out of their way or risk getting crushed in their politics.

Corpio was in his early fifties, a large and healthy man, getting soft around the middle. Long nose, high cheekbones, the bronzed skin of his face and arms showing signs of much wind and sunlight, as did his sun-bleached blond hair. His eyes were bluish-green, now shot with red as if he had been rubbing them. He must have spent much time in his youth on ships out at sea, but since gone soft from spending

more of his days on land for his public career.

“Come in and sit down, please,” He indicated a chair in front of his desk, into which I lowered myself. “I have knowledge of your reputation, Felix, and more importantly I have knowledge of your discreetness. Both are of the utmost importance to me at this time. Do we have an understanding?”

I nodded my assent. It was my experience that when men who have risen high in society open like this, the details will come only on their terms.

“This is a personal matter, one where I have need of your special skills. It does not concern the other *rhones*, nor the Senate. Whatever you may find, you are to report to me and only me.”

I merely nodded again.

“This matter concerns my youngest son, Caeso.” There was a catch in his voice as he said his son’s name. He stared at me and blinked several times. I remained silent, letting him collect himself. “My son is dead. He was found last night in most unusual circumstances, which I require you to investigate.

“My son... my youngest son Caeso... he was not like his elder brother Marcus, never found his sea legs and was never interested in our family’s business and traditions. And yet he was his late mother’s little darling. I tried to bring him up to be a man as befitting his heritage, bought him the best tutors and exposed him early to our life. Unfortunately, he hadn’t showed any interest in that. Always more interested in wines and poets, never anything respectable. Nothing kept his attention for more than a season, and yet he was gregarious, full of life and vigour, out and about with his friends.

“Late last year something changed. He became morose, secluding himself for days on end. At first I thought this to be just another phase, as all his affairs of the heart were quick to pass, but soon his studies were affected. I arranged for him to travel to my brother on Kebros. I thought perhaps a bit of travel and sea air will improve his health. My brother Publius Quinctius promised to look after him and get his mind off from what was troubling him. He has a big country estate as well as many businesses there, and we hoped to entice young Caeso out of his doldrums. I sent my friend’s son, Gnaeus Drusus,

with him.

“At first this seemed to have worked. My brother had written to me that life amongst the isles seemed to have done Caeso well, even if he was not interested in learning about the family business. They came back at the end of the shipping season, and resumed their studies.

“However, over winter his health seemed to deteriorate. He became pale and thin, wasting away. I called for the most renowned *magisteri carneum*, the best physicians money could buy, but he refused to see them and claimed that he needed no medicine.

“I then decided to send him on a sea voyage again, this time for an extended period. However, when I informed him of my decision yesterday, he became distraught. He absolutely refused. At first he argued that he simply could not be away from Egretia, that I was sending him into exile, ostracising him and might as well just execute him. When I persisted, he became hysterical, frantic. He started to abuse me in the most offensive language. I had my steward confine him to his room. We could hear him railing and wailing for a while, and then he seemed to calm down.”

He stopped and took a deep breath, steeling himself. “My steward was closing the house at midnight as usual. Being fond of Caeso, he went into his rooms to check on him. Caeso was not in his room, but my steward thought he merely sneaked out to find food. He searched for him, and was about to call me when he saw Caeso come back from the street. He saw him proceed to his room, and was satisfied that my son had regained his senses. However, in the morning when he went to check on Caeso, he found him in his bed, dead, and upon his face a horrible grimace. His face... You will soon see that about him which made me question the circumstances of his death. If for no other reason than to please the shade of his mother my late wife, I would like to know how — and why — he died last night.”

* * *

We walked together, Corpio himself leading us with Typheus following behind me. We crossed the atrium, went through a short

passage and entered a large open garden. We were headed towards the living and sleeping quarters, located at the back of the mansion. As we drew close, I glimpsed a loggia facing the ocean, with magnificent open vistas visible between the columns.

“No one knows yet,” continued Corpio as we walked, “besides the three of us and my steward. We kept the door locked and ordered the staff away. After the initial shock, Typhus recalled stories about you and your... expertise in these matters.”

We stopped before a closed room, and even from this side my skin tingled and I could smell that tell-tale odour. The door was guarded by a short, bald man with a harried look, which Corpio introduced as his steward. He nodded at the man, who unlatched the door and opened it. “See for yourself,” said Corpio. “We left everything as we found it.”

I stepped into the room. The shutters were still closed, and morning light filtered through the cracks, its angled rays providing faint illumination. I could see a figure lying on a sumptuous sleeping couch and smell the voided bowels.

I stepped closer. Caeso was on his back, body straight, kept taught and rigid by rigor mortis, his arms by his side and his backside lifted clear off the mattress. He appeared as if frozen in the middle of a spasm of pain. I looked at his face and the impression was made stronger. His eyes screwed shut, nostrils flared, mouth in a rictus with bared, clenched teeth. One could almost hear his teeth grinding in death.

I have seen people die, some with terrifying spasms of pain. I have seen men die and their bodies left to freeze in a fixed position in rigor mortis. Yet never have I seen someone die and their body freeze in the middle of such a spasm.

Under the smells of sweat, urine and faeces was that acrid-sweet scent which meant I had a serious paying job ahead of me. I walked to the window and opened the shutters. I heard a stifled cry behind me. I turned back to examine the body. Caeso was about eighteen years of age, a handsome fellow. Shoulder length, honey-coloured hair. Smooth skin, strong chin and cheekbones, long nose. A picture of health, were it not for the obviously painful death.

I approached the bed and ran my finger lightly along Caeso's forearm. I could feel the goose-bumps of his flesh, and the tingling that ran up my own skin became almost palpable. I knelt down beside him and with my hand tried to gently pry open his eyes. The muscles of his face were screwed tight, and refused to be moved. I tried the same with his mouth, but got no further. His teeth were clenched so tightly they showed hairline cracks.

I drew back his light sleeping blanket and exposed his body. I heard the sharply drawn breaths behind me, and had trouble myself not to react. Caeso was a young man, with good physique. He was lying in front of us, naked, with body held rigid and backside raised off the mattress. But that was not what caused the gasps. On his chest above his heart was a livid, red-purple tattoo with the outline of a seven-point star. From it, spokes radiated along his ribs, enveloping his torso and keeping clear of his abdomen. I leaned closer and could see faint traces in blue that worked their way around the red lines, all of which extended down his sides and on to his pelvis and genitals, spiralling around his manhood.

The acrid-sweet smell, the tingling touch, the tattoo — it was enough to confirm the general cause of death, but I needed more information and this was the only opportunity I would have to gather it. I drew my knife from inside my tunic and looked back at Corpio. “May I?”

He stared blankly at me.

“I need to... extract some samples. I will open his mouth and his eyes as I need to look into them. This will not be pretty, but I will not disfigure him. I have to ascertain certain things to be able to investigate his death.”

He turned even whiter than before, covered his mouth with a kerchief and nodded faintly.

“I may be able to reset his features,” I added to try and ease his pain. “You should be able to hold him on the customary bier without much sign of the way he died.”

I turned back to the corpse. The easiest way would be to break his jaw, however, I had just promised his father to keep him presentable for a proper funeral. From my dagger's sheath I pulled out a couple of

very small and very thin blades that were stored in special pockets in the side of the hard leather. I ran my finger along his jaws towards his ears, feeling the bunched muscles. At the point below the ear where the muscles terminated and attached to the bone, I placed one of the small blades at a sharp upwards angle and stuck it gently with the hilt of my dagger. It slid in and I could feel the ligaments rolling under the skin. His face acquired a lop-sided expression, half relaxed and half in rictus, like a person who suffered a stroke and went mad. I repeated this on the other side, and his whole jaw became relaxed.

I unscrewed the back of my dagger's pommel and extracted a tightly-wrapped parcel. I carefully unrolled it and took out a thin, sharp sliver of light-coloured wood from amongst the contents. I pricked my finger with it and then chewed on its bloodied end.

I braced myself against what I knew was coming, and moved so that my back would hide the corpse's head from his father. I put my hands on his jaw with my thumbs pressing on his chin and forced his mouth open. I pulled the sliver of wood from between my teeth and poked it as deep as I could down the throat, bloodied end first. A noxious cloud of foul-smelling, thin black vapour escaped his teeth. I shut my eyes and held my breath, leaning back to avoid getting it in my face. I heard retching and retreating feet behind me. There was no mistaking the boiling, bubbling, melting sounds and the foetid smell of putrefied flesh as the wooden chip blackened when touching his oesophagus. I hastily moved closer to the window and saw that Corpio was leaning weakly in the doorway, Typhoeus was on his knees in the garden, and the steward was gone. Corpio was doing better than I expected, I must say.

Caeso's jaw now slack, I retrieved my thin blades and set to work on his eyes. These would be harder to relax without leaving more visible marks. We always look to people's eyes to connect with them, to feel their humanity. A person's eyes tell you so much about them, without a word crossing the gulf between the two of you. We fall in love with a look. Poets far better than I have scribbled many a verse on the subject.

But what awaited me behind Caeso's eyelids when I finally lifted them up was decidedly not human. At first all I could see was a yellowish ball. When I coaxed his eyes around to face the front, there

was no trace of original irises, just a red hexagon lined in black. I let them roll back inward and let the eyelids to snap shut. Better that way.

One last thing remained. I placed myself so the watchers would not see my next actions, as what I was about to do was *nefas*, sacrilege. I moved next to the corpse's torso, and carefully cut the skin down from his solar plexus along the line of the ribs, trying hard not to cut across any of the red and blue markings on his chest. I did the same on the other side, and ended up with a bloody red wedge on his abdomen pointing up at his sternum. I inserted the tip of my dagger under the skin at the top of the triangle and lifted it gently, then rolled the skin back to expose his inner organs. I set to work separating the layers of flesh and muscles. I reached inside, gingerly pushing my forearm half way to my elbow under his ribs, making my way down through moist innards and up past his lungs before I felt the calcified mass where his heart should have been. I withdrew it, yanking and cutting gently with the knife where it still connected to flesh and veins. I could feel its hard facets as I grasped it tightly. At last I stood up and held out my hand, the light from the window reflecting in the blood covering my arm. In my hand was what had been Caeso's heart and was now a large heart-shaped ruby.

"It would pay for a lavish funeral if you could sell this," I said, "but I doubt you would find a buyer. This is most definitely the product of necromancy."

CHAPTER II

I walked lazily down the hill, thinking of my next move. As I was nearing the harbour, I became aware of the time by the pangs of hunger. I stopped at a roadside stall and bought a squid-on-a-stick, roasted with garlic and spices. Our city may be named after the regal birds that grace our shores, but our people march on squid.

Back in Corpio's study, after he had recovered sufficiently to walk there without aid, we shared a pitcher of unwatered wine, just the two of us. "But why?" he kept mumbling, "My beautiful boy, who would do such a thing?"

"You know as well as I do that necromancy is illegal in Egretia, and indeed everywhere else across Nuremata," I said. "This predates the founding of our city. To my knowledge, the Collegium Incantatorum has managed to enforce this quite well, both internally and whenever we encountered it among the barbarians."

"Of course, of course. This just makes it all much more perplexing. Caeso had never shown any interest in the *incantatores*.... Naturally, I had him enrolled in the Collegium Mercatorum, as our family has been for ages. He was not a star student and I didn't hold high hopes for him, but he had never shown an interest in the other collegia...." Corpio was rambling, gulping his unwatered wine at a rapid pace. I let him continue, grunting my sympathy to keep him going. "I tried

to push him in the right direction, naturally, as any concerned father would. He never objected, though I could see his heart wasn't in it. He was far more interested in attending plays and parties, even the street mimes interested him more.... No head for numbers, that one, and never got used to the sea. His late mother and I indulged him, being our youngest, and once she passed away.... Perhaps I was not as close to him as I thought I was, as I should have been. What is a father to do? If he would have voiced an interest in the other collegia and presented a good argument I would have let him go; I have my Marcus to continue with the family business when I am gone..."

"Tell me about his friends," I asked.

"He attended the college with the son of my good friend Gnaeus Drusus Scaevola. Drusus *filius* still lives with his parents, not far from here. Caeso and he had known each other since they were little, as our families have always been close. Drusus is not even a year younger than Caeso.... But that doesn't matter any more, does it?" His eyes filled with tears.

I remained silent as he dabbed at his eyes and sipped more wine. He took a deep breath before continuing. "Drusus will be able to tell you about his social and college life. He has been in the college for two years now, so was not such a freshmen that my Caeso would shun him. Drusus always looked up to him, you know.

"Besides Drusus, I have heard him mention Gnaeus Porcius and Gaius Lutatius. I met them both briefly in the Forum once, but I do not really know them or their families all that well. Respectable, albeit not in our circles. I am sure, though, that they had visited Caeso in this house. I am often away sailing, both due to my business and to my duties as the Rhone of Fish, as you can imagine. Caeso was a good boy, still young. I only let him wear his manly toga the year before last. I held him back till the last moment, hoping to keep him a boy for as long as I could.... But a boy he still was, and had entertained his friends with my best wine when I was gone. My steward will be able to tell you more, and Typhesus, too, perhaps.

"He would have had other... acquaintances... amongst the mimes and performers he liked so much, although of course I am not acquainted with any of them. Caeso was intelligent enough to know

not to sully the ancient family name of the Quinctii Corpiones with too overt a relationship. A young man of our class may cavort and fornicate with the street trash as much as he likes, but never treat them as equals.” I could hear the steel in his voice, see the flint in his eyes. Distraught though he may have been at the death of his son, he still came from an ancient family of senatorial status, and had risen to be elected a *rhone*.

Deeming Corpio’s constitution sufficiently restored, I began to approach the less savoury events leading to his son’s death. “How much do you know of Caeso’s last few days? I ask, because while not much is known about the actual workings of necromancy, sufficient information has filtered through the ages. The tale of Servilius Ahala from the days before our people founded Egretia is still taught to our aspiring *incantatores* as a tale of caution. Necromancy was a dark offshoot of the *magia vita* by our reckoning. In all our encounters with its manifestations, it was an elaborate process with lengthy ceremonies, many participants and arcane requirements. It was not something one dabbled in, and the signs are taught to our young *incantatores* so that should a necromancer arise again our whole state would unite against him.”

I looked into Corpio’s eyes. “So please forgive me. I really need to know everything odd about your son, whom had he met and where he had been in his last days.”

“I was here, busy with the *Contio* of *Rhones*. With the winter now over, shipping has resumed. While I haven’t gone for any extended length of time this year, I did have quite a bit to oversee of both my private enterprise and in my official capacity. When I was home, though, Caeso was always alone. He had been neglecting his studies, and had been looking ill, as I mentioned, though by the end I had given up on the physicians. Not because I do not trust them, but because they agitated him even more and he would refuse to come out of his room and meet with them. I will instruct Typheus and my steward to answer your questions. You can have the run of the house, though I would remind you to remain discreet.”

I sat up in my seat, gathering my toga. “One last question, Rhone, if you please. Why me? Surely you suspected the nature of his

death. Why not contact the *rhones* of the Collegium Incantatorum?”

“I thought that would be obvious. At the end of this year I will have to step down from the office of *rhone*, but that is not the end of my public career. I am in good standing to be granted concessions to open sea routes around the Cape Massau. Surely you are aware of this through the forum gossip? A scandal such as this would spell the end of my political career, and the total collapse of my business. All of my family’s business, including my brother’s, would collapse, as no one would trust us ever again. The name of the Quinticii Corpiones will be forever blackened, and the work I have done on the treaties from Massau to Urica would collapse.

“I will not risk this! I will not have one of the *mentulae* in the Collegium Incantatorum hold this over my head, or even just blabber drunkenly to his mistress, only for the name of Egretia itself to be tarnished amongst all the nations around the Mare Saepiae!”

He forced himself to recompose. He sat back in his chair and folded his hands in his lap, took a deep breath. “Your reputation precedes you, Felix the Fox. While some of your sordid history is known to me, so have you managed to rise from it on the back of your integrity and confidentiality. What I need now from you is absolute discreetness. I wish to know the circumstances of my son’s death, yes, but I do not wish to see my world collapse around me. Caeso was young and, as we clearly know, foolish. Yet I do not believe that in his heart he was rotten. Find out for me who did this to him, find him and deal with him and keep my name out of it, and I will see that you are well recompensed.”

* * *

I finished my squid and almost wiped my hands on the hem of my toga. Dascha would cluck her tongue at me, should I return it with fish sauce stains. After my mother’s passing she had taken it upon herself to care for my appearance, and her values and aesthetics were just as conservative. I kept walking down to the harbour, stopping to wash my hands and take a drink from a public fountain.

When I finally made my way down to the waterline of the bay, I turned left to the east, instead of right towards the Forum and the direction from which we had come in the morning. This way would lead me to the mouth of the bay and the small island of the Pharos lighthouse. The view and the clear air, I hoped, would bring me fresh ideas as well.

I walked on the promenade that runs along the inner shore of the Septentrionali. The sea traffic on this side of the bay mostly revolves around private jetties and moorings. Most commercial wharves are on the south side, on the Campus Civicus and along the base of the Meridionali where the great markets are. I walked past private yachts, ranging from small, fast sailing boats to gargantuan pleasure barges powered by tiers of rowing slaves.

The alleys going up the hill disappeared between the blank walls of the mansions of the rich, with the occasional fig-tree-lined avenue offering public open spaces and routes back to the Vicus Caprificus that runs along the ridge of the hill.

Interviewing Typheus and the steward at Corpio's invitation had not provided me with further details. They had both corroborated Corpio's account of the events, confirmed that Caeso's friends Porcius and Lutatius had not been as close with Caeso as Drusus, though they had visited him recently nonetheless. Neither Typheus nor the steward had had any insight into Caeso's activities with his friends. He did not seem to have confided in them, which was not unusual, and he had kept his activities outside of the house to himself. Being a student at the Collegium Mercatorum and still a young man, he had not been accompanied on a regular basis by any slaves.

After the interviews, I had searched Caeso's rooms. I had turned over his mattress and looked under it, went through his chest of clothes, looked under his bed, tapped the walls for hidden compartments, went over the desk at his small study, read all the tags of the scrolls in the pigeon holes of his library and opened a few randomly to check their veracity, tore into his mattress, tapped his table again for secret compartments.

Nothing.

Not even the hidden cache of pornographic poetry one would expect from a youth of his age.

I had asked the steward where else Caeso could have hidden prized possessions around the house. With Typheus and the steward under instruction from Corpio to assist me in any way possible, the three of us went over the whole mansion in as much detail as the time allowed. We had asked questions of those in the household who might have seen Caeso about, making it appear like a simple enquiry. We'd tried to look nonchalant as we poked around in unusual, out of the way places where Caeso might have stashed private possessions, but I'd had no doubt that gossip would circulate that night amongst the slaves about the stranger who had even used a mirror to shine a lamp down into the latrines.

And still, nothing.

* * *

I reached the tip of the Septentrionali, where the Bay of Egretia opens to the Mare Saepiae. As I walked around the bend, the Pons Ignis came into my view — the viaduct bridge that leads to Insula Laridae, the tiny island on which the Pharos stands. Going further north around the tip was not possible beyond this point; the northern side of the Septentrionali, the side facing the open sea, was all sheer cliffs. The mansions of the rich at the top enjoyed both spectacular views and natural protection from intrusion, at least from that side.

The massive blocks of stone that make the five arches of the bridge had been laid centuries ago. When our nomadic people had finally decided to settle around the bay, they had established a fishing village at its innermost point. As trade grew, so did the village. The erection of the Pharos is considered one of the three marking points in the establishment of our great city.

I crossed the Pons Ignis and climbed laboriously on the steep path up the hill to the foot of the Pharos. Both the location and the features of the hill made it the ideal place for a lighthouse. Our people had maintained a bonfire there for ages, well before the lighthouse.

As our port had grown, so had our knowledge. It was the incantator Iunius Brutus who had summoned forth the Pharos over four hundred years ago, and announced to the world the rising of our city and our collegia. He had used his mastery of the six elements to raise up a square pediment upon which stood a slender tower of solid marble, and to bind a permanent flame at its head. His skill had been so refined, that on the spire of stone he erected were scenes in bas-relief spiralling up to the top, depicting some of the important events in our city. From our humble beginnings as nomads, to our victories over the Volsci and Gabii who had inhabited this region before us, to the original Curia of the Senate, to Curtius' famous sacrifice in the Forum, to the eruption of Vergu that had nearly destroyed the city, and to the image of himself raising the self-same spire at the top.

At the very top, on a capital styled with acanthus leaves, Iunius Brutus had crafted a white marble statue of a magnificent egret with the plume of feathers on its head looking almost too delicate to be made of stone, and in its beak it held the eternal flame. In the four hundred years since, despite wars and natural disasters, this flame has never gone out. It was said that he had been rooted to the spot for seven days and seven nights as he had chanted and directed the mystical energies that had brought forth the Pharos, and that when the ritual had been completed and finally he had moved, a thin layer of marble dust had covered him.

I climbed the pediment at the base of the towering structure. The square podium of the Pharos was about thirty feet high, with stairs running along its side to a wide platform on which people could stand and watch ships on the horizon. The spire jutting out in its centre was a solid block of hard marble a hundred feet high, and none but the terminally insane would attempt to scale it and reach the fire of the egret at the top.

I searched along the depicted scenes until I located the mythical scene depicting Servilius Ahala striking down Athanasios the necromancer. What inspiration could this ancient hero give me now?

I sat down with my feet dangling and my face to the open sea. I gazed out and could see sail-ships and rowboats, fishermen and pleasure craft. The sun was at my left, the water dazzling, and a light

breeze pushed a few wispy white clouds high above.

A perfect day, and yet my mind was occupied with dark thoughts. I was contemplating approaching Drusus first as the most promising lead, but I wanted to think before I did. The problem I was facing was that this assignment was much stranger than what I was used to. Not only that, it was much stranger than anyone I know of would have dealt with. The subject of necromancy does not come up often. Even to bring the topic up would cause most people to dismiss me as crazy at best, or report me to the *rhones* of the Collegium Incantatorum as a dangerous lunatic at worst.

This was definitely not my usual line of business. Purloined jewellery, missing persons, cheating spouses were what paid for my bread and fish sauce. The occasional debunking of charlatans, confirmation of ancient scrolls, and even, rarely, a real magical ring were what would one day fill my memoirs. But necromancy? Definitely out of my way. If I should live to see the end of this, it would make the shining pinnacle of light in my memoirs. Who knew, perhaps I could even sell them!

A big if, considering surviving anything to do with necromancy was no mean feat.

I needed some insight, a few discreet levers I could test when talking to witnesses. A way to delicately broach the subject of Caeso's mysterious death, test and see reactions without bringing the authorities breathing hard down my neck for dealing with forbidden arts. I needed a refresher on necromancy, a review of the current schemers, any recent events that might involve illegal sorcery and trading in contraband.

In short, I needed to meet with Araxus.

Araxus the Mad, as he was known.

CHAPTER III

Last I'd heard, Araxus had been living in the slums out on the Campus Civicus amongst the disowned slaves, the lost foreigners, the mad and destitute and other nonentities. Since this was directly on the opposite side of the bay from me, my options were to swim, walk the long way around the bay, or try to catch a ride across the bay with a hired boat.

I crossed the Pons Ignis back to the mainland and walked along the promenade, scanning for passing ships. This being the more affluent side, a few enterprising people were always lurking nearby to carry the rich to destinations around the harbour. Wearing a respectable toga I had no trouble in hailing one to me. I chose one captained by a man who did not look like he might slit my throat and dump my body in the bay, and haggled him to the price of two bronze sestertii. More for the practice than the money, as the cost would be added to Corpio's bill.

My seaman had four slaves to row us towards the Campus Civicus. We zipped past larger ships, making our way across the bustling harbour traffic. His rowboat had space for several people and the crew were used to heavier loads — rich people rarely travel without a retinue. We aimed at the public wharves, busy at this time with ships loading and unloading goods of all kinds. We imported the fish and squid sauce our people loved so much, shipped from the Kebros

archipelago in large carinate clay vessels stamped with seals of quality, ranging from the exquisite to rotgut. We also imported grains, livestock, fresh catch, and bales of cloth from all around the shores of the Mare Saepiae. Our main export consisted of wines from vineyards on the rich volcanic soil on the other side of Vergu, if one didn't count the navy ships transporting soldiers and patrolling our shores as an export. Pleasure craft and messengers carrying official dispatches accounted for the rest of the traffic. Our harbour was the pumping heart of our empire and on a clear spring day such as this my driver had his hands full in guiding the small boat amidst all the traffic.

We reached the Campus Civicus and moored at one of the public wharves. I got off, and the boat quickly pushed back out to scan for customers from the water, rather than remain in berth and pay the harbour master his fees.

I walked past the great silos and warehouses and the basilicae with their merchant offices, avoiding the constant traffic of slaves and wagons carrying loads, yelling foremen and hurrying clerks. An ox-drawn cart was blocking my way, delivering farm chickens to the market. I went behind it and stepped in a steaming turd left on the pavement by one of the oxen. "*Merda! Fellator asini!*" I called after the driver. He turned round and gave me an evil eye, raising his whip. I hastened around the corner. Discretion and all that — it really wasn't the time to hang about.

I walked behind the busy port and towards the Circus Magnus. In all the cities I have been to, the areas of public entertainment are always bordered by the establishments catering to the common patron — taverns to get them drunk first, and then brothels and gambling houses to relieve them of their money in their inebriation. I stopped at a few and got myself well-watered drinks of cheap wine; I took time to chat with the whores standing in doorways advertising their wares and special tricks in the most obvious of ways; I distributed a few copper *quadrans* to street urchins. Eventually, I found those who had seen a mad hermit with the features of Araxus. I followed their leads to the refuse heaps outside of the Campus Civicus.

Araxus and I had been friends in our youth. We had started at the Collegium Incantatorium together, embarking down a promising path of a life steeped in magic and adventure. But then Fortuna had dealt me the first of many blows.

My father's business had collapsed. He had been a trader of antiques, fine arts, exotic jewellery — and the occasional enchanted item. His business had been strong enough to keep us well supplied, if not carry us into riches. He'd had agents scouring remote kingdoms and had been a fixture at auctions, always ignoring the slaves and furniture and browsing for the unique items of interest. He'd kept a warehouse to store curiosities of all flavours and for all tastes. His patrons had known him and trusted his reputation in acquiring oddments.

I had not followed him into his business. Instead, I had been the first of my family to attend the Collegium Incantatorium. My parents had been so proud the day I had passed the entry exams; my father had gone around buying drinks and declaring to anyone who would listen that one day his boy would make it to the Curia of Senate.

His fall had been sudden and swift. Brought on by natural disasters, and then aided by his rivals who had kicked him further on his way down. Within a month he had lost shipments and caravans, his bankers had refused to extend his loans, and irate creditors had been knocking on our door day and night.

In the end my father could bear it no more, and had taken his life with his sword. My mother had never recovered and had spent her remaining short years crying herself to sleep every night.

My family's fortune gone, I could no longer continue my studies at the Collegium. I had been lucky to keep our house, though I had had to sell almost everything except Dascha.

Throughout this, Araxus had been my unbending support. I had many times escaped the pressures of my own home to his. After I'd finally left the Collegium, he had tried to keep me abreast of his learning, sneaking me an occasional scroll. When all others had turned their back on me, he had been my one true friend.

I had rebuilt my life, or rather built a new life. I'd tried the

legions briefly, but quickly realised that soldiering was not for me. By chance, I had run a few errands for the firm of *Gordius et Falconius* and found that while I had neither the training to be an *incantator* nor the money for a merchant business, I had the nose for both. I had learnt much from these esteemed men, and then forged my own path as a fox; though often a ferret would have been a more accurate name. I'd even managed to find love.

And then Araxus had had his accident. His mind was gone, and no one could restore it. I still am not sure what he had been attempting, when he'd blown up his rooms and half a wing of his father's house.

I'd never forgotten his kindness to me, though, and strove to repay in kind now that the tables were turned. I had done my best, at first to find a cure and later to keep him from harming himself.

And then had come that sordid affair with Helena, and I could never forgive him. I had not seen him since.

* * *

The stench was incredible. Our great city has a sewage system, the underground *cloaca* that runs from the top of the highest neighbourhoods on the slopes of Vergu and throughout the two arms. The sewers are flushed with water from the *Aqua Sextiae* and carry the human refuse out to sea; usually excreta, though the occasional body is not unknown. Anything that cannot be carried by water has been dumped by slaves for centuries in the dales of the hills behind the Campus Civicus. Laws prohibiting the dumping of refuse in the streets had some effect, and taxes fuelling gangs of slaves to cart street trash to the city dump had more. From broken furniture to dead babies, if it was unwanted, it ended up here.

I coughed and held a linen kerchief to my face. I scanned the mounds of rubbish for moving figures and saw a sad few walking about. I wandered around, looking for those who had made their habitat there, trying to see faces that were trying to hide from my gaze, examining profiles without getting too close to their owners.

Eventually, I saw his figure. Stooped and thin, a man my age who

had once been tall and slender, now walking leaning on a makeshift crutch, more like a pole of rough wood. Hair hanging in ragged greasy strands all around his face, a scraggly beard, a dirty and torn tunic that might once have been fine. As I approached he lifted his head and stared at me, and I knew it was he.

In his youth, Araxus had been handsome. Slender, with a face like an old Hellican statue by Praxiteles — high cheekbones, a firm chin, long nose, wide forehead and rings of strawberry-blond hair neatly framing his visage. And in the midst of it all a pair of laughing eyes and a welcoming smile that made him adored by all.

The face in front of me had lost all that charm. Gaunt, dirty, weather-beaten, looking much older than his thirty-four years. Unshaven and sickly. But his eyes, oh his eyes! These showed the sign of the curse he had brought upon himself more than anything else about him. His green right eye was looking at me with animal-like cunning intelligence; his black left eye was constantly wandering around, independent of the other, and when it turned to me I shivered.

I approached slowly. I took the kerchief down from my face, hoping for a sign of recognition. “Araxus...” I began, and saw recognition hit as his right eye widened.

“No! Do not look at me!” He started, turned and ambled away from me, fast despite his uneven gait and bent back.

“Araxus, I need to speak to you!” I hurried after him, trying not to slip on the rotting garbage. “Araxus! You owe me this!”

But he kept running away.

“Araxus! Do not make me say her name!”

That stopped him as if hit by a mallet. He stood with his back towards me, rocking gently. I stopped a few paces behind him. Slowly, he turned. Both of his eyes focused into mine, and I felt a cold chill.

“Some debts cannot be repaid,” he stated, “and some things cannot be forgotten. No matter how hard we try.”

“That is true, Araxus, the facts remain as they were, as do your past transgressions. But for whatever small and insufficient comfort, you now have the chance to repay a little of this back, before Dis claims you for all eternity.”

We stared at each other a moment more, and then he sagged.

His left eye finally resumed its incessant wandering and I felt my own body relax as its gaze was no longer transfixing my soul.

* * *

We walked back amongst the busy alleys of the entertainment quarter of the Campus Civicus. I wanted to talk to Araxus in quiet, so I found a tavern that wasn't bustling with customers. I ordered us some wine and olives. The proprietor looked askance at Araxus, so I put a full silver *denarius* on the counter and ensured us a flow of cheap wine and a quiet corner table.

I looked sidelong at Araxus. I hoped I was not wasting my time. By the looks of him he had not kept in touch with any of his old life, or much of any public life in Egretia, for that matter. But then, the invisible people on the outskirts of our society often hear and know and realise far more than we give them credit for.

"After all these years, I still cannot forgive you," I said, "and this doesn't change anything. But right now I need some information." A slave girl came to our table and set up two wooden cups before us, filling them with wine. I sipped mine and wished I hadn't, it was so sour. When she walked away I resumed. "Have you heard anything of late to do with your old interests?"

"Perhaps," he said, and when I gave him an unimpressed look he continued, "I hear a lot of things, mostly rubbish and superstitious gossip. I no longer move in the official circles of power, as you can well imagine. However, other channels circulate their own stories, and ring true more than others. What brings you back to those subjects? Why turn your gaze on something you walked away from?"

"I did not turn my back on it, as you very well know! I had no choice in the matter. I turned my back on *you* after... Well, let us not go there. This would have been recent. A cabal, most likely. With activities carried on in darkness, and nothing to alert the authorities. Those are my guesses; I know not for certain."

His right eye wandered to look at the passing slave girl, and his black left eye gazed into me. When the girl got out of earshot,

his mad eyes switched back. “Whatever you are after, it cannot end well. Walk away now. Leave these accursed dealings to those who seek them, before you join me and mine.”

“I thank you for this advice,” I said coolly, “but I have a better record of keeping my affairs in order than you. Now, can you tell me anything of use?”

“Do you know what your supposed cabal was attempting to do?”

I gazed at him for a long moment. “The Rite of Pelegrinus.”

He choked. His right eye looked at me with incredulity and his left was roving madly, trying to see all directions at once and even turning back into his skull, exposing a yellow orb shot with red veins. “No one — no one! — is that stupid. Any *matris futuor* apprentice of an *incantator* will have had this drilled into their brain, and the *rhones* of the Council at the Collegium Incantatorum will disabuse anyone who even dreams of starting down that road, like a centurion a green recruit missing his mommy!”

“And yet someone did. He failed, of course, but I saw the *stigmas* and even held the heart of ruby in my hand.”

“Who was he?”

“The son of a merchant. He shall remain nameless.”

Araxus sipped his wine, lost in thought. He chewed on the tip of his unkempt beard. I flagged the passing slave girl, gave her a *sestertius* and asked her for stuffed pastries, feeling the rancid wine churning in my stomach. Araxus continued to stare into space, mumbling occasionally to himself. The girl returned and left two pastries on a plate in front of us. It was surprisingly good for an establishment of this kind, a sturdy dough filled with chopped herbs and garlic and some slivers of meat of unidentified origins. Drizzled with fish sauce to complete the flavour.

Araxus wolfed down his pastry. “Tell me what you remember of the rite,” I asked.

“A nasty business. We don’t know much, as the whole *terminalis* branch of the *magia vita* has been outlawed for centuries and never properly studied. The heart of ruby is a definite sign, nothing else quite like it. Requires a cabal, certainly. From the one scroll about it I have read, all those many years ago at college, it will involve long prepara-

tions. Chants, consecrations, potions, ceremonies. I still cannot believe one would be able to hide such a thing. I don't know for certain what the ceremony entails, at least it was never in the accessible parts of the library. What I read was a treatise of the effects and signs. There might be more detailed references to the requirements, the ingredients and formulae hidden somewhere in the locked rooms. I don't imagine you could get access again...?"

"Not a chance." I replied. "My client would not have access or enough influence to get it, and anyway prefers to bury the matter discreetly and without any undue attention from the *incantatores*. Now, if I were to ask around and look for cabal members, do you know of any signs I should watch out for?"

"From memory, such rites involve many *stigmas*. It would depend largely on how the ceremony was completed, though I would hazard that other members might also require tattoos of power to channel the energies. Smaller than those of the chosen one, of course. All these *stigmas* require preparations and special inks. I could ask around..." Araxus began with a suggestive tone.

"You do that, but quietly. No names or details, listen more than you talk. And tell me as soon as anything even remotely relevant turns up." I got up and left a few coins on the table. Araxus would need them if he was to go around, and Corpio would hardly notice them on the expense account.

On the way back home after leaving Araxus, I stopped at the Baths of Mauritius just next to the Pons Orientalem. I paid extra and hired a slave to scrub and massage me after a long dip in the cold and hot plunges. I needed to get the smell and memory of Araxus and this day off me.

CHAPTER IV

I set out the next day to seek out more information, to cast a net and see what catch it might bring. The meeting with Araxus had not provided me with anything concrete, but could yet bear fruit in the future. However, there were other sources I could tap that might prove fruitful.

I put on my toga again, my only toga, and started to visit all of my father's old contacts. At least the honest ones, not those vultures who had danced in glee at his downfall. I went from portico to basilica, tracking men I'd once known. These were all men who traded in artwork — from marble statues and scrolls of poetry to Assyrican fine silks and Arbarican gold jewellery. They were men who understood the value of things beyond mere ordinary goods and knew a lot about mysterious origins and exotic materials that might be used in illicit enchantments. Well, knew enough to make convincing stories for their buyers, who sometimes knew far more and sometimes far less. These were all well-respected citizens, owning offices and warehouses filled with exquisite items for the connoisseurs.

I shared many stuffed dates, honeyed almond cakes and sweet sesame biscuits, and far too many cups of watered wine. I asked non-specific questions and got non-specific answers. The result was that the word was out that I was in the market for a certain kind of information, and was willing to pay handsomely. Now to wait until

greed got the better of discretion for those who were traders and hagglers at heart.

In the afternoon I came back to my home, feet aching from the walking, stomach aching from the sweets and head aching from the wine. I wriggled out of my toga in the atrium and went to bed in my loincloth, stopping only for a refreshing drink of cool water delivered by the mad faun's engorged member.

I collapsed on my bed and slept the sleep of the drunk, tired from walking and from bad dreams the night before.

* * *

I woke up after sunset, which suited me fine. Time to do more canvassing, this time amongst people who wake up with the night.

Dascha prepared a dinner of farina porridge with bits of bacon and some fried eggs and bread. Her cooking skills may not have been much, but she knew what I would need without my asking. I ate the meal reclining on a couch in the square garden at the back of my house, with the ever-present leering faun for company. It was done in bronze, and the paintwork was worn and chipped. I had sold the rest of my father's artwork collection, though somehow I have grown sentimental about this one — or so I told myself rather than face the fact that no one would buy it.

I put on an old but still-decent tunic, strapped my dagger under the sleeve of my forearm and put a money pouch with small coins on my belt, with the real pouch hidden deep within my tunic's pockets.

I set out on foot from my house, heading south back above the ridge of the Meridionali and down the other side. All the establishments I planned to visit would be local, either in the Subvales, along the waterline or in the Campus Civicus. The Subvales, the far side of the Meridionali away from the water and facing inland, is mostly built up with tenements, housing the poor, foreigners and freedmen — the Egretian stews. Along the shores of the bay are the great markets — the Forum Bovarium, Forum Frumentarium and Forum Piscarium — and in between them are the silos, warehouses and pens to hold

the products that will be sold the next day. These areas become devoid of respectable citizens when the sun sets, and another crowd of dock workers and labourers takes over.

Considering the establishments I was planning to visit and the streets I would be walking tonight, I made my way as quickly as I could to a disreputable tavern called the Pickled Eel at the base of the hill, near the Porta Fulvia. I located the scrawled sign of an *amphora* with eels peeking out on the side of a narrow alley off an odd-shaped public square. I walked up the alley for a few paces and ducked into a low doorway. This being night, my eyes were already accustomed to the dark, yet the perpetually dim-lighted interior still gave me pause. I walked in, looking at the back tables as I went, but could not see the person I was after.

I went to the bar at the back corner, bought a drink for myself and asked the proprietor, "Is Crassitius in tonight?"

"Busy at the back," he said with a leer, "though I'd say he should be finished soon."

I settled myself to wait at a free table.

I sipped my wine once, and decided to leave it. I had a long night ahead, and did not wish to start it off with heartburn.

A few minutes later my friend Crassitius walked in from a back passage, buckling a belt. A short and plump girl followed him, and he patted her backside as she passed. I hailed him over.

"Felix! By Servilius' shrivelled scrotum, if it isn't Felix the Fox!" He clapped me on the shoulder.

"Marcus Crassitius," I smiled with a wince. "Still keeping fit, I see."

He laughed. "Yes, indeed. In my business one can hardly avoid it. What has it been now, two years since I saw you last? You bastard used to come here more often. What's the matter, suddenly too good for your old pals?"

We talked for a while, trading insults and news. When he ordered his third cup of wine and was beginning to reminisce about our short army tenure together, I thought we had exchanged enough pleasantries.

"Do you still hold that stable of ex-gladiators? I need to hire one

for tonight.”

His smile never wavered, but his eyes narrowed and all signs of inebriation vanished at the smell of business. “Yes, yes I do. I have some waiting nearby, as one never knows when a customer requires arms broken or ladies entertained. What are you after tonight?”

“Something large. Suitably intimidating, to avoid trouble.”

“I have just the thing. A huge Arbari, all red moustaches and rippling arms, trained as a *cestus* and decent with the *gladius* as well. For how long?”

“Just for the night.” We haggled just a bit and agreed on the fees and insurance costs in case I returned damaged goods. Crassitius insisted he was giving me mates’ rates, but it still seemed a bit steep. Still, in order to claim my expenses from Corpio I needed to come back alive from this night.

Crassitius sent a slave boy to fetch the gladiator, whose name, I learnt, was Borax. He was not exaggerating. A hulking Arbari, bending his head under the low ceiling, complete with big drooping red moustaches done in plaits and long red hair, plaited as well. Wearing only leather breeches, a cloak and a permanent scowl, he was bare-chested and covered in blue woad tattoos. He looked like he could lift a boar one-handed, and probably fit one in his stomach in a single meal. The costs of feeding him must have accounted for the significant sum of money I’d paid to hire him.

I set out with Borax on my trail to visit all the seedy establishments where Egretia’s night life takes place. As with my father’s respectable contacts, I wandered from one establishment to the next. I visited bars, gambling dens and whorehouses, tracking down people who often wished their whereabouts not to be publicly known. These were also men who specialised in moving items of value, though usually without their previous owner’s permission. I asked about rumours, oddments, trading in contraband and suspicious activity. I asked about rich youths out of place, and characters asking the wrong kind of questions.

Unlike with the more respectable people of the morning, when I cast my lines at night I had to put more bait on the hooks. Good deeds

are seldom their own reward with that crowd, so I also spread a few coins. I had to be careful, far more careful, for these people were both more and less discreet than the professional traders. More discreet, because they knew the value of contraband and secrets and the dangers of dealing with them. Less discreet exactly because they knew full well the price attached. I needed it to be known that I was in the market for unsavoury information, and yet not expose my client.

And just like in the morning, I walked for mile after mile, talked endlessly about non-specific things and got non-specific answers. The food was worse, though, and the wine wretched. At least the presence of Borax's garlicky breath behind me kept me safe.

I returned to my home in the small hours of the night. Not a fruitful day, but that is the inglorious nature of my business and I did not expect immediate returns. My nets cast, if any information about this unfortunate affair was available, in whatever social stratum, it would make its way to me.

* * *

I woke up late on the following morning and decided it was time to meet Gnaeus Drusus. I chose to forgo a formal toga, and instead wore my best tunic, the one in light blue with a golden trim of Hellenic key design along the hem. I needed to balance my appearance and project a respectable yet approachable image to the young aristocratic friend of Caeso.

I made my way to the Forum Egretium through the perpetually busy streets near the harbour. I went to the Collegium Mercatorum, where Gnaeus Drusus *filius* would spend his days in apprenticeship to a master trader, learning anything from geography to accounting to foreign languages. There were the shop keepers, tavern keepers and small business holders — and then there were the privileged youths of the rich families, attending the Collegium Mercatorum and learning how to run trading empires.

I located the door-slave. Not a burly guardian, rather a scrawny-necked, balding little man with his nose up the air, who made it

clear that even though he was a slave, he was still better than anyone not on his lists. I enquired after young master Drusus, and had to grease his palm with a full *denarius* to learn that he was indeed inside. Another silver *denarius* went to buy a promise that he would deliver a message to Drusus to meet me at a corner tavern.

On the way to my selected vantage point, I stopped at the fountain of Iuno Moneta that stands before the college and refreshed myself. I caught one of the running street urchins, gave him a *quadrans* and waved at the door-slave, who nodded slightly. A fall-back, in case the young master would be too busy for the likes of me; he would point him out to the boy, who would alert me discreetly.

I settled myself at a small table in a seat with a clear view of the Collegium, and made ready to wait.

I did not need to wait for long. Right around midday, the cadets and personnel of the Collegium started to pour out of the huge building with its impressive colonnade front. All were in a rush, keen for a break in their busy day. Eventually, the door-slave whispered something in the ear of the boy I had hired, who promptly ran to me and pointed to a young man walking alone. "This is the man you are waiting for, *domine*. The short one with the dark hair."

I rose and approached Drusus as he came closer. "Gnaeus Drusus, allow me to introduce myself. I am Spurius Vulpus Felix, known as Felix the Fox. I would be most delighted if you would let me to treat you to some wine and refreshments."

We sat and I waved for the slave girl to bring us good wine and a light lunch. The crowds normally around the Forum Egretium were of a better class than the ones I had seen last night, and consequently the vintage was significantly more palatable. The girl laid out a set of plates in front of us, with pickled quail eggs, tiny fish battered and fried whole, olives, bread, and bits of goat meat and carrots in a cumin sauce.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" he asked as he popped a pickled egg into his mouth.

"I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Gnaeus Drusus, for I have the unpleasant task of informing you of the death of your friend Caeso Quinctius three nights ago."

He blanched.

“He was found dead in his bed. His father, as you can imagine, is quite distraught.”

“What happened to him? He was well the week before when I saw him last.”

“We are not entirely certain.” That was not a lie. “As a matter of course, his father the *rhone* asked me to look into his death, to ease his own conscience. You said Caeso appeared healthy, however I understand from Corpio that his health had been deteriorating of late?”

“Maybe not in peak form of late, though not about to keel over. But you’re right and his health had been deteriorating throughout the winter.”

“His father mentioned that you went with him to Kebros last autumn. Would you tell me all about it?” I asked.

“Last year he fell in love with a street mime, and was acting all forlorn, losing appetite and sleep, because of course he could not tell his father. So Quinctius Corpio had either guessed or completely misunderstood, and decided to send us both on voyage to get Caeso’s mind off the subject. We went on a trip to Kebros late in the shipping season. His father made all the arrangements with his brother on the island, and asked me to accompany Caeso to keep an eye on him and try to lift his spirits up.”

“Do you remember the girl’s name?”

“Who said it was a girl?” he leered. “But no, I do not. Never met her. To hear him moon about her was quite enough.”

“Did the trip cheer him up?”

“Well, at first he was dejected, as you could expect. Like a brat whose favourite toy was taken, he kept pouting throughout the whole voyage. I tried to console him, pointing out that while there was no future with a street trash mime, he could still bed her — or any number of similar *moechae* — any time he wants. Why couldn’t he just make his father happy and marry a nice girl and keep the mime as a mistress like the rest of us?”

“Having seen young people in love, I will assume that did not impress him.”

“Not in the least. Caeso wandered around the island listlessly.

His uncle had even arranged for a suitable young girl of wedding age to be present during a few of the dinners, though he showed little interest. Not that I blame him, she was a bit of a shrew — too well educated for my tastes. Any which way, after a while on the island Caeso was improving. All that fresh air, walking, riding and sailing. Got a bit of appetite back. We took a few boat trips to the smaller islands. I got bored after a while and he continued alone. He started to come to dinners all aflush and excited, with a healthy appetite. He seemed to be back to his usual excitable self. He even made some advances on Aemilia — the girl I mentioned — but then we had to return to Egretia before the shipping closed for the winter.”

“So what happened that his health deteriorated again when you returned to Egretia?”

“I am really not sure. We sailed back in November, right at the closing of the sailing season. I was eager to return by then; I had enough of that wretched island and could not imagine being stuck there for the winter. When we arrived in town, Caeso went searching for that *moecha* of his, but could not find her. Her troupe had gone for the winter. This dampened his spirits — he must have been hoping for some tryst with her at Saturnalia,” Drusus winked.

“What was her name, that mystery woman?”

“Sorry, I don’t remember. I’m sure he mentioned it, but she was a nobody, really. I think he might have just gotten some fever, the poor fool, as I have not seen him around the Collegium much recently.”

“Do you know of any of his activities during the *intercalaris*? Or of anyone I might ask who would know? His father would be most appreciative.”

“Not really, I had not seen much of him lately, as I said, and to my knowledge neither did the rest of our little circle. He started to miss attending the Collegium more and more, though of course the teachers cut him some slack because of his father the *rhone*. If you ask me, he just got an embarrassing venereal disease from the street trash mime, and didn’t want his father to find out.”

We chatted a while longer, but I learnt nothing more. Soon after Drusus left, and I finished the lunch alone. In my line of business, one learns to eat when one can, especially when it can be charged to an

expense account.

CHAPTER V

I spent some more time that afternoon chasing others of Caeso's old college mates, and by late afternoon managed to track down Lutatius and Porcius. Lutatius was a lanky youth, of light reddish hair and pimply face. His friend Porcius was slightly taller and heavier, with chestnut hair and a straggly beard in what I presumed was a failed attempt to hide his even more numerous pimples.

At first it seemed they did not have anything to add to Drusus' story. They had all seen Caeso become withdrawn and unhealthy over the winter *intercalaris*, had all lost touch with him recently as he'd shifted from his usual haunts. None had followed him to his new pursuits, and none could offer me new insights or leads.

However, when Porcius said that Caeso and Drusus were thick as thieves, my interest picked up. "Have you seen them much together recently?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," said Lutatius. "They were always going around, their heads together. Not just in the college, mind you, but after hours as well."

"I did hear them mention a club they frequented," said Porcius, "A place up on the Clivi Inferior by the name of The Dented Skull. It's an upmarket tavern, masquerading as a den of debauchery for the entertainment of the rich who want some excitement without the actual risk. He mentioned a name, now what was it? Something foreign,

Hellican, I think.”

“No, I’m certain it was Assyrican,” responded Lutatius. “Zymaxis. That was it”

“That’s right! You are correct, Gaius Lutatius,” said Porcius. “Definitely Zymaxis.”

“Have you ever visited that tavern?” I asked.

They both shook their heads. “Not our kind of place,” said Porcius. “Too up-market,” added Lutatius with a sigh.

“Did you notice anything odd about Caeso’s behaviour throughout winter?”

They looked at each other. “Well, his health was deteriorating, that was certain,” said Lutatius. “It started last autumn, I think. It got worse as time went by, though. He became gaunt, lost colour. Dark circles around his eyes. Withdrawn. Started to miss out on studies. We visited him a few times, but could not lift his spirits.”

“I don’t know what wasting disease it was,” said Porcius, “though I do know his father hired the best *magisteri carneum* in Egretia and even they couldn’t cure it. In fact, Caeso refused to see them, though we tried as well to convince him that it is for his own good.”

“If you ask me,” said Lutatius, “it wasn’t a fever at all. He was heartbroken.”

“You and him were always such saps,” said Porcius.

“A romantic heart is not a sap!”

“Why do you think he was heartbroken?” I asked before they could continue their debate.

“He told me once of a girl he met,” said Lutatius. “Her name was Mahatixa, a Mitzrana from the other side of the Montes Mauretanii. Exotic, lithe and very attractive. I haven’t seen much of her, though I remember Caeso did have good taste in women, even if he didn’t have the sense to choose those of his own class.”

Porcius grunted in agreement to this.

Lutatius continued, “I think I saw her troupe on the streets maybe a month ago, just before the new year. They put up the usual mime tent and move it often, flying a pennant with the image of a sphinx. They perform next to the docks and the Circus Magnus, in the Campus Civicus.”

Nothing more in my conversation with Porcius and Lutatius seemed relevant, as the two friends kept interrupting each other on tangential philosophical flights. I thanked them and requested that they inform me should they remember anything else of note. I paid for our wine, and thus had a feeling that they would come calling if something did rattle their memories.

A more interesting question raised, was the significance of the differences between Porcius' and Lutatius' version of events and that of Drusus. Did Drusus really not know of his friend's involvement in the matters leading to his death, or was he aware but trying to mislead me? Was he himself involved, perhaps, and now trying to downplay it? Or were the two men I met today just prone to overstating innocuous events? Given Drusus' — and more importantly, his family's — background, I would need more evidence before I could confront him.

* * *

I decided to go in search of Mahatixa before tackling the Dented Skull. While I had no doubt I could handle the Clivi Inferior at night, it being a reasonably quiet neighbourhood for the most part, I wanted to see first if I could learn anything about the mysterious woman who had captured Caeso's heart.

I stopped at home briefly to change and then started to poke about at the docks. This being *Avrilis*, twilight came early, and I did not wish to get caught out on the Campus Civicus in full darkness. I walked for a while amongst the hurrying people finishing their work for the day and making their way home. Fortuna must have smiled on me that night for I saw a crowd gathered just next to the silos of the Forum Piscarium, and in its midst a mime troupe tent flying a flag with the sign of the sphinx.

I approached and stood at the back, watching the show. It was a crude affair, and so was the crowd. These were not the people to appreciate a fine Hellican drama, with intricacies of hubris and inescapable fate. This show involved stock characters and a farcical plot — a scatterbrained old master, a young vixen wife, her neighbour-come-lover,

and the ubiquitous slaves that see everything and snigger behind their masters' backs. Plenty of hiding behind curtains and baring of breasts to the catcalls of the crowds. They were good at what they were doing, though, better than most such troupes.

There were about seven people I could distinguish despite the masks, playing the various roles. Two were women, both young. No self-respecting Egretian troupe would put women on the stage, but this was neither Egretian nor particularly respectable. There would be a few other people involved, no doubt, though no more than ten.

Between one skit and the next, while resetting the stage, the troupe put out more entertainment so as not to lose the crowd. It involved the usual children performing acrobatics and playing flutes, and a big hulking brute who lifted them all together above his head. I could not be certain, of course, but I felt reasonably sure that the dark-skinned beauty dancing the Dance of Seven Scarves would be Mahatixa. Her body glistened in the last rays of daylight, shimmering on her clear, dark skin as the scarves snaked their way around her contours, wafting behind her as she danced and somersaulted, eventually floating to the ground like leaves in autumn. Not a single man in the crowd looked elsewhere while she was dancing, though the more worldly ones clutched their money pouches even while their jaws slacked open. She disappeared into the tent with the last scarf lingering behind her, floating in the breeze. A collective sound between a sigh and a groan escaped from the lips of every man amongst the audience, as the rest of the troupe emerged quickly and started on the next skit.

I waited until the show was over and the crowds dispersed. The actors and dancers went around with bowls, collecting donations for their performance. I moved closer to the girl, and as she neared me I said her name as if I knew her. She looked up at me, and I smiled at her. I offered a full *sestertius* for her bowl, and said, "This is for the lovely show." As she smiled at me I produced a silver *denarius* and held it between thumb and forefinger. "And this," I added, "is yours if I can just talk to you about Caeso Quinctius."

She looked doubtful for a moment. "Pretty girls going alone with strangers makes a good story," she replied, "one that seldom ends well for the girl."

“My name is Felix, called Felix the Fox by some. And you are Mahatixa, the marvellous Mitzrana dancer who stole Caeso’s heart. So there — no longer strangers.” I smiled. “But to reassure you, why don’t you ask that brute of a strongman you have with your troupe to accompany us? I will gladly buy him a cup of wine too, if he will just sit in the next table and let us talk.”

That seemed to have reassured her that I meant no harm. “Wait here,” she told me.

* * *

She went back to her troupe and helped with the final packing. A few moments later she returned, dressed sensibly in a pleated dress and cloak, and accompanied by the hulk, whose name, I learnt, was Harkhuf.

We walked to the closest tavern I could spot and settled ourselves at a side table with Harkhuf at the table behind Mahatixa. I ordered wine for us and beer for the brute. His scowl disappeared as the buxom serving maid placed the tankard before him, and I was certain he would not bother us.

“I heard about you through some mutual friends of Caeso Quinctius, Gaius Lutatius and Gnaeus Porcius,” I started, waiting to judge her reaction to news of his death. “Have you seen Caeso recently?”

“Not since we came back. We got here just a few weeks ago in time for the festival of *Anna Perenna*, after having spent the winter in Hellica. How is dear Caeso doing?”

My pause caused her to knit her perfectly arched brows. “I am sorry to be the one to tell you — Caeso passed away. He was found dead in his bed on the morning of the day before yesterday.”

She shuddered and drew her cloak tight around her shoulders.

“Did he fall to some illness over the winter?”

“He was unwell, yes, though his family knows not what affliction it was.” I looked at her eyes as I said that, and could see no guile. Her reactions seemed genuinely surprised, sad to hear about Caeso’s death.

“And what is your role in this?” she asked. “You are paying for this interview, so you are not here to bring me this news out of the kindness of your heart. Your eyes have a keen look in them, and you do not strike me as a spendthrift. A hired ferret then, hired by Caeso’s father. Something odd about his death, then! Surely you cannot suspect me; I have not been in Egretia this whole winter!”

I smiled, despite myself. The girl was intelligent and not afraid to show it. “No, no, please do not be alarmed. You are correct that I was hired by Corpio *pater*. I found out about you from his friends, Porcius and Lutatius. I am only trying to piece together Caeso’s life, to ease his distraught father’s mind. I heard from Drusus, as well, that he was much in love with you. Would you tell me about your involvement with him?”

“Oh, it was just a summer fling,” she started. “We were performing one day last spring at the other side of town, for a more respectable crowd. We tried to see if we could earn more money that way, rather than the *quadrans* and *semis* we get from the dock workers. We even put on not a mime show but selected scenes from proper dramas. Still, we needed to draw crowds for that and when I did my dance of seven scarves the *vigiles* decided to chase us away. I guess some old stuck-up sourpuss passing on the street had taken offence. Caeso must have been in the crowd, for he followed us here. At first he seemed to me just like any other moon-struck puppy that follows me. He was quite insistent, however, and quite charming, and quite good looking...

“I refused him, of course. But he came back with flowers, jewelry and other gifts almost every day. He seemed so naive, a boy really, and I just found it so charming.... So I let him buy me dinner one night. And then another night. And we talked. And went on walks. I am my own person, you know. Not a slave of the troupe. So long as I was around during performances to draw the crowds and help with the tent, Djaty, our leader, does not mind.”

I stirred the dregs of wine in my cup with my finger, and waved the servant maid to fetch more wine. Behind Mahatixa I could see Harkhuf down yet another tankard of ale, and shamelessly pinch the maid’s buttocks as she passed by. The maid was young, voluptuous and flirty, and yet had nothing over the woman sitting in front of me. I

traced my wet finger on the table leaving behind doodles in wine, and looked at her sparkling black eyes as she was telling the story.

“And so it went on through the summer and into autumn. We spent time away from both our lives. We took many walks; he liked the island of the Pharos — close yet far, we found seclusion there. He could not present me at any formal events, of course, his family would never allow it. But we saw his friends for informal dinners with other people our age. I met Lutatius and Porcius and liked them, and we met Drusus, though I liked him less. Too judgemental, too proud of his family’s history to appreciate the likes of us. Caeso and I went to sideshows and games together. Private poetry parties. Taverns of a more relaxed nature. There is quite a lot going on at night in Egretia, and one just needs to know where to look and who to ask.

“He tried to make promises he could not keep, about marrying me one day. I did my best to disabuse him of this notion. His family would not allow it, he could never join our life, and I would never agree to be cooped up inside like some Egretian matron. He would not listen, though. He kept talking about how one day he would make it all work, and damn the social order.

“Well, I tried to get him to cool down, though unsuccessfully. Thankfully, his father sent him away to Kebros, and Caeso went. Cursing and pouting, but went nonetheless, bent to his father’s will.

“My troupe moved to Hellica for the winter part of our circuit. We visited Heraclion, Ephemezica and Phrylia. We went back out in spring and took a ship here. I wondered if he would show up again, as I haven’t seen him these past few weeks. And now you come to tell me that he is dead...” She shivered again.

“You must be distraught.” I placed my right hand on top of Mahatixa’s left on the table, covering her hand in a gesture of sympathy. She must have been used to this kind of affections from men, and hardly even glanced down. She must have been used to flirting for a living, too, as she did not draw her hand away, and I will not compliment myself that she had any other interest in me.

“Tell me,” I decided to move the conversation, “you are Mitzrani, am I correct?” She nodded, and I continued. “Your people have a great interest in the afterlife. They even preserve the corpses of the dead, for

the life after life. Did Caeso ever show an interest in the subject?”

“Not really,” she said. “He was very much a young socialite. Dreamt big, but lacked the determination to achieve anything beyond a mediocre career as a merchant in his father’s business.”

I kept my hand covering hers and brought it gently towards me, looking at her eyes. As her hands reached the doodles of wine dregs I drew on the table, I could feel a slight warmth from them, saw them glimmer and shimmer in the corner of my eye, and I smelled the tinge of fresh air after rain.

“Come, now,” I said, “there’s no need to lie. We both know that he was interested in such matters, and that he shared this with you.” She sat back and tried to withdraw her hand. I held on to her wrist firmly, but without squeezing too hard. “Please, let us be civil. If you will just look behind you at Harkhuf, you will see that my generosity with the beer has left him quite inebriated. If you try and shout to the other patrons, well...”

I extended my right index finger and touched the faintly glowing wine doodle on one side, and then drew it across her wrist, and touched the pattern on the other side. I withdrew my hand. She tried to snatch her hand back, but found it bound to the table with the shimmering tracery holding her wrist tight.

“I am just a citizen sitting across from a foreign woman. You, on the other hand, will not be able to remove your hand from this table while you tell me lies.” I looked into her eyes and saw tears of frustration tinged with fear. “Please, do not be afraid. I will not harm you; I just need to know what you have omitted from your story.”

She tried in vain to pull her hand away. She looked back at Harkhuf, who was talking to himself with an unintelligible slur. She sat back then, straightened up, and looked at me squarely.

“I did not lie,” she said fiercely. “What I said was the truth.”

I saw the tracery brighten just a little. “You have omitted something.”

“Yes. I did. I guess... I guess I did not like the direction Caeso was taking last year, and tried to distance myself from him. I got scared, you see. He did see me after he got back, a few days before we left Egretia. One night he took me to this little tavern, out on the

Clivi Inferior. At first I thought we would just be meeting some of his friends there, the neighbourhood is quite sedate with plenty of houses for the affluent merchants. However, when we got there he went right to the back, beyond the tables and the dancing girls. He led me down to the basement, and we did meet some other people already there. The room was dense with smoke, lit only by bad oil lamps. I thought I saw Drusus there, but I was not sure.

“We sat at a table to one side, and Caeso did not talk. Just told me to wait and watch. After a while a hidden lyre player started, playing something atrocious and discordant. Some red light shone through the smoke, and in walked this short bald man, wearing strange robes and kohl around his eyes. He talked about eternal life, about riches and power, about upsetting the natural order and taking what was rightfully theirs.

“Frankly, I thought he was a nut case and a fake. He tried to pass himself as a Mitzrani, but to me it was obvious he was not. None who believe in our old ways would ever talk like that. Caeso was mesmerised, however, drinking in his every word. He kept talking about passing tests of loyalty, and how only the worthy will be elevated, become privy to this power when they finally attain it. Eventually, I could not take it any more and left. Caeso wanted to stay, and we argued, and eventually I walked home by myself.

“After that I cooled things with him, or at least I tried to. He was still obsessed with me, only now I could see it for what it was, an obsession. He would not apologise for letting me walk back at night by myself, only tried to persuade me to come there again, to see the ‘bright future’, as he called it. I tried to shake him off; I wanted none of that. Luckily, we left Egretia to Hellica right after that incident, and I have not seen him since.”

I looked down at the table. The tracery was faint, pulsating slowly and calmly. She was telling me the truth.

“And who was that man? Do you know his name or anything about him?”

“I don’t know much more about him. I only saw him that once, and refused to go there again. Caeso later told me his name was Zymaxis.”

* * *

I walked home slowly, deep in thought. Mahatixa had told me all she knew, of that I could be certain. After I had finished questioning her, I'd felt uncharacteristically guilty of mistreating her, so had offered to help carry Harkhuf back to their lodging. Never leave a pretty woman spitting at your back, as my father used to say.

At first she had refused and wanted nothing more to do with me, and in an effort to patch things up I had told her I believed her tale about Zymaxis, hinting without revealing the mystery of Caeso's death. I'd assured her that I would be going after him. That, and a generous pay for the interview, had seemed to mellow her opinion of me a little, though I wish I could believe my own words with the same confidence.

I had offered her again to help carry Harkhuf, but Mahatixa had given him a disgusted look, kicked the chair from under him, and exclaimed "let the big ox sleep here on the floor! He deserves whatever happens to him, such a lousy guard he turned out." She had emphasised this with an extra kick to his thigh.

I had still ended up walking her to her troupe's lodging. I had dragged the heavy frame of Harkhuf after her, and disgusted as she had been with him, she'd come back to help me. These troupes stick together like family, knowing full well no one else will. The shared exertion had mellowed her attitudes towards me even more, and I had managed to part with her without getting spit upon.

As I walked back from the inn I considered all the questions this day had raised. Who was the mysterious Zymaxis? Were his powers real, or was Mahatixa's assessment that he was a fake correct? If he was responsible for the necromantic spell that killed Caeso, how did he manage to avoid detection by the *magisters* of the Collegium Incantatorum? What should I do about confronting him? To what extent was Drusus involved or innocent in this matter?

I would have to tread carefully. I could cast my cantrips in a stinking tavern on a foreign woman of low standing, but I could never do so on someone of Drusus' standing, or even Porcius and Lutati-

us. If any of them were involved, it would require an official court, something Corpio was particularly keen to avoid. And as for Zymaxis, I would have to ascertain his identity and status. If he was indeed performing necromancy inside the boundaries of our city, he might have very powerful patrons.

CHAPTER VI

I slept badly that night, plagued by dreams of the body in the well again. I gave up on sleep before dawn and decided to see if I could still catch the night crowd of Egretia as they dispersed to their homes, before the day people took over the city. I dressed and armed myself, raided the kitchen for some unappetising cold leftovers of cod in coriander and caraway sauce, and left before first light.

I walked up the maze of alleys leading from my house to the Vicus Petrosa at the top of the Meridionali and continued briskly along that main road to the Forum Egretium. Near the Baths of Sestropius the road angles down the hill towards the Forum, the living heart of our city, and offers a spectacular view of the open space ringed by impressive public buildings. Despite the hour there was plenty of traffic through the streets — straggling wagons hurrying to get back out of the city before the daylight curfew, slaves starting their day before their masters, *vigiles* doing the last rounds.

I crossed the Forum and headed up the Vicus Caprificus, and turned left at the Via Caeca. To continue right would have put me on the Septentrionali, where Corpio and many other rich and powerful had their city mansions. I was heading towards the Clivi Inferior, the lower slopes of Mons Vergu. It is a respectable quarter of smaller houses and low tenement buildings. An area populated not by the upper crust, yet by people still rich enough to own a good house close to the

cliffs and fresh sea breezes.

The Dented Skull was located somewhere near the sea cliffs not far from the Porta Rupis. At least, that was the description I got from Mahatixa. Wandering through the winding streets and asking around, I eventually managed to locate the dented legionary helmet hanging by its top loop over a door in a side alley off a round public square. It was well after sunup by then, though still at a time when taverns are rarely busy.

The tavern itself was situated on the ground floor of a four-storey *insula*, with a different entry than the common areas and the upper floors. I went inside, sat at a table near the wall and ordered a breakfast of bread and eggs from a sleepy-looking girl. I looked around the place. Two drunk patrons snoring in a corner. A tired whore, getting ready to leave. A middle-aged couple, finishing their lovers' tryst. As my eyes adjusted to the dark interior, I saw more of the decor. This was a respectable neighbourhood of successful merchants, retired generals, *quaestors* and clerks of the various colleges. People with a good income and a decent lifestyle, believers in old ways and values. And yet the place was decorated like a dock-side tavern, dimly lit, crude images on the walls, rough, long tables. However, as I looked closer I saw the images on the walls were crude in subject but not in execution. The tables were rough, but the benches padded. The place was masquerading as a low-brow haunt in order to give some illicit excitement to the otherwise drab surrounds.

I also noted the doorway in the back and caught a glimpse of stairwells going up and down.

The girl returned a few minutes later with my fare and a cup of well-watered wine. She was blond, barely eighteen, a slim figure in a low-cut tunic that barely covered her buttocks and must have helped distract paying customers. I put my arm around her waist and drew her to me. "Tell me, honey, do they have back rooms around here?"

She looked me up and down. I was just barely old enough to be her father, but she was probably used to amorous advances of men old enough to be her grandfathers. It did not take her long to evaluate me. I have a classic Egretian look, with the bumpy nose and curly dark hair.

Clean shaven, of average height and medium build. Nondescript. I try to keep myself fit. I have been called handsome by my mother, but by few others.

The decent tunic I was wearing and the jingling of my purse must have had more effect than my looks. She glanced quickly around, and, satisfied that none of the other customers would notice her absence, said "Sure, why not? Come."

I went with her towards the back. Once past the doors to the kitchens, I turned to the stairs leading down. She pulled my arm, saying "No, my room is upstairs," and started on the way up.

"I have heard some tales of fantastic deeds done in basements of taverns around here. I was hoping you would show me." I winked at her.

"The room downstairs is strictly for private functions. Mine is upstairs."

"Are the 'functions' as wild as the stories go?"

"Some, yes," she answered, "but last night's orgy has finished already."

The upper floor consisted of a short, dark hall with small cubicles opening from it, sheets of cloth hanging over the doorways for privacy. Her sleeping cubicle was cramped, most of the space taken up with her bed. A tiny shuttered window high up on the wall let in some light and air, and a little picture done on a wooden slate was the only decoration. Her cot was simple, and a chest of clothes acted as a table as well. She turned to me, pushed the sleeveless tunic off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor, standing completely naked in front of me. Slim of figure, fair of skin, with small breasts and pink nipples, her body was unspoiled by the ravages of time, yet her eyes looked old beyond her years. "Two *denarii*, and anything kinky will cost you extra," she said, as if in agreement with that last thought.

When we were done we lay side by side, heaving and sweating. After a while, she turned on her side, facing me. "If you're interested in the orgies, there will be a young boys' orgy tomorrow night, if that is your thing." She traced the scars on my chest with her forefinger. "And if not, I am sure I could find the time for you..."

“And tonight? What kind of party goes on tonight?”

Her face darkened. “Not tonight. The nights before the *Nones* of the months are reserved. I do not like the people that come.”

I put my arm around her shoulders. “What do they do that is so bad?”

“Nothing sexual, if that is what you mean. They hold meetings in a darkened room and their leader, that horrible little man, leads them in frenzied chanting. He pays my master well enough, so my master doesn’t lose on food and wine. But I do not like them, not at all.”

Before I could ask any further questions we heard a shout from downstairs, “Didia! Didia, where are you? Come here and finish your cleaning!”

The girl, Didia, jumped out of bed and started to dress hurriedly. “My *dominus*! I must go down. Please stay here a minute and do not tell him. Instead of giving him his commission I can put it towards buying my freedom.”

She hurried out. I got up, dressed, and left three silver *denarii* on her little chest. I picked up a strand of her blond hair from the bed and rolled it safely in my kerchief.

I went down the stairs softly. When I reached the ground floor I looked about, heard the noises in the kitchen and the tables at the front. I continued quietly down the stairs to the cellar.

The room under the tavern was dark, with only a single candle left sputtering in a corner. From what I could see, it had no windows or other exits. A few couches and small tables were arranged haphazardly around, cheap pillows strewn about. There was a low dais in one corner away from the door. Sconces on the walls held extinguished lamps. Little alcoves with draperies offered intimate seclusion from the main room. The frescoes on the walls depicted various scenes of debauchery, from lesbian orgies to fauns raping nymphs. The place smelled of spilled wine, smoke, sweat, and semen.

I heard stamping feet upstairs and ducked from the small landing into the room. There was not enough light to search properly, and if I ventured inside I would risk bumping into the furniture. I bent down and gathered some dust from the floor, adding it to the kerchief.

I waited patiently for a minute more, then climbed upstairs when I could not hear anyone walking around. I sneaked past the kitchen and into the main room. Didia was busy cleaning the tables, but I could see no one else. I winked at her as I walked out.

* * *

From the Dented Skull I made my way back home. Unlike this morning I walked along the waterline and bought a live chicken at the Forum Bovarium. I needed fresh blood, even though I was certain it would only tell me what I already knew. The earth of the floor of the house, hair from its denizens, blood of a sacrifice, wrapped in white cloth, thrown in the fire. Look at how it burns, and see if any residual *magia* was there to permeate the place.

I had the blood of a sacrifice (the chicken, soon to be dinner), dust from the floor (of the actual room), and a hair of a denizen (Didia, who lived above). Close enough. It would tell me what the lack of tingling on my skin and nose had already told me, that the room under the Dented Skull saw nothing more untoward than a little buggery.

So where did the Rite of Pelegrinus take place? And what did Zymaxis do in the Dented Skull, if not hold ceremonies with a cabal?

The stuff I do is small fry, things just above what any piddling charmer can do, not worthy of a decent *incantator's* time. But a necromantic ceremony like the one performed on Caeso requires a lot of raw power to be channelled correctly, and would shine like a beacon for anyone with the true sight. It would cause ripples and echoes that would be felt far away and stay around for a long time.

And yet someone had managed to pull just such a necromantic ceremony without raising an alarm. That an alarm would be raised, I was certain, for our *quaestors* of the Collegium Incantatorum keep a close watch on dangerous activities. That I would hear of an alarm being raised I was also certain, for such a thing could not be kept a secret. The rumours would percolate through the city faster than bad fish sauce through an old lady.

I was planning on returning to the Dented Skull that night to check out the mysterious Zymaxis. Planning ahead is always prudent, so I stopped at the Pickled Eel on the way and arranged with Crassitius to have the services of Borax again for the night.

By the time I got home it was almost midday. I was planning on catching up on sleep, but that was not to be. As I walked in, I was informed by Dascha that Quintus Sosius had sent me a message saying he might have some information for me. I turned about and left again.

Quintus Sosius was a trader specialising in rare manuscripts. One of my father's fellow cronies, they competed in an amicable manner, almost as often combining resources to collaborate on specific deals. When my father's business collapsed, he had been one of those who were truly sorry to see it happen. He had even tried to help me afterwards, and although appreciative, I had not been seeking the life of a merchant and had struck out on my own.

His main offices were in the Basilica Antonia, as a measure of his success. He also owned scribe shops, producing copies of scrolls to be sold separately. He dealt with anything and everything, from ancient comedies by Aristophanes to the occult writing of the Assyrians, from verified original manuscripts to high-quality copies made for discerning customers.

When I reached his offices I was shown in by his secretary with no delay. Sosius was a man in his sixties, still with impeccably-styled white hair, with a slight build, a small paunch, and green eyes as keen as you would ever see. He rose from his desk and greeted me warmly. "Spurius Vulpus! Come in, come in, have a seat! Wine?"

"Please, Quintus Sosius, no one calls me Spurius Vulpus these days. Just Felix will do." Sosius clapped his hands once, and an obsequious servant rushed in with a silver tray carrying a pitcher of wine and a pitcher of cold water. "Well watered, if you please," I asked, remembering the breakfast I'd never gotten to eat.

"Please do not insult my Verguvian wine. This is from my private estate on the Erratus," he said and continued to pour a generous amount of wine into our cups and only a splash of water. He handed me a cup and we sipped together. He was right to brag; the wine was excellent. I said so.

“Thank you, but I did not ask you here to discuss my wines. I have some news of that matter you asked me about. I received a letter from one of my agents in Hellica regarding an old library being offered for sale. This is an old collection which I always hoped to acquire one day. It seems like the master has finally passed away, and his children are more concerned with converting it to cash.

“This library, if my sources are correct, has a section with an interesting collection of manuscripts of the various branches of *magia*. Most are probably known here, some are completely foreign, and some — so I am told — have been banned. While I cannot confirm this with absolute certainty, the rumour is that it does contain a few ancient scrolls on the *magia vita terminalis*.

“Whether the information is correct or will prove germane to your investigation I cannot promise you. However, I can offer you this. The sum being asked for the whole collection is a staggering ten talents of silver. It is not a sum I am willing to pay without close inspection of the contents, however, the library is located in Ephemezica and I am loathe to travel there now. Instead, I will give you a letter of introduction making you my agent. You can peruse the scrolls and find out their true worth, and, of course, find out any information you deem relevant to your case in the process. You will have the authority to bargain on my behalf, either for the whole collection or for part of it, for a price you see fit. I trust your judgement — your dear old father raised you well. I could even pay you a modest commission. My agent there will be able to arrange for the actual payment and shipment if required. What say you?”

It did not take me long to decide, as I saw no downside. I planned on confronting Zymaxis tonight. If he was a true necromancer and responsible for Caeso’s death, I would have this matter resolved and be free to undertake the errand. If I lived through confronting Zymaxis and solved the case, the travel away and extra income would be appreciated. However, if this line of investigation did not pan out for some reason, this library might still turn out to benefit my investigations if it would help me find elusive information about necromantic rites. And, of course, the commission would be welcome just as much.

“Your offer is most kind, Quintus Sosius, and I would be happy

to take advantage of it. However, I may not be able to leave for a few days, as I am still investigating leads here.”

“Excellent, excellent. I would rather have you there to evaluate the collection. This reminds me of the old days with your father, how we used to manoeuvre together and get the best of both buyers and sellers.... At any rate I will have my scribe issue you with the official letters, and send them over to your house by tonight.”

When I got home there was another messenger waiting for me. Typheus was standing in the atrium, examining the faded mosaics of the pool. “My master would like to know if you have made any progress on the matter. Marcus Quinctius wishes to proceed with the funeral as quickly as possible. He was loathe to call the embalmers, for fear of rumours spreading. The body lies in state in our atrium, attired according to custom, but since no embalmers have been to it... The funeral needs to happen very soon. My master was worried about the cremation, though, in case there were some... residual effects.”

“I understand his concern. Nobody likes an exploding body on the pyre. I will give you the name of someone who can assist Quinctius Corpio discreetly in this matter. He is a foreigner, of course, but can be trusted. He has knowledge about tattoos of power, and if any residue remains in Caeso’s body he will defuse it. Come to think of it, I will see him later and give him directions to your master’s house. There is also an embalmer I know, one with looser connections to the official guild of embalmers than traditional Egretian ones. A man of great talent and discretion.

“As for the investigation, I have made some progress with leads which I am following, and will report back as soon as I have something concrete. Corpio must surely understand the delicacy of this issue.” A thought struck me, and I decided to try it. “The knowledge of these arts comes from afar. Here in Egretia it has been locked or burned for centuries. However, I have information from a trusted source about a trove in Ephemezica that will likely contain information on the... on what Caeso was involved in. I was wondering, could Corpio arrange a passage for me on one of his ships? Unless I can find all the sources of the power used on the young master here in Egretia, I will need to go

soon, both there and to Kebros where Caeso spent last autumn.”

Typheus left a short while later. I gave him directions and instructions on how to engage my acquaintances Brewyn the tattooist and Akhirabus the embalmer. In return he promised to speak with his master and give me a reply soon about passage on one of the *rhone's* ships.

Finally, I got to sleep.

CHAPTER VII

I woke up at dusk. Two neatly-folded papyrus squares were waiting for me in my study, sealed with wax impressed with Quintus Sosius' ring. One was addressed to his agent in Ephemezica and the other to the owner of the library. Just as I was finishing Dascha's chicken and beans, I heard her open the door and speak softly. Borax was here and it was time to go.

We made our way to The Dented Skull. The place was half empty, the daylight crowd having gone by now and the night people not yet arrived. I selected a table near a wall, with clear view of the rest of the dining hall and the passage to the back.

I waved down a passing girl and asked for wine. When she got back with two cups and two pitchers, I had her pour more water than wine. "Tell me," I asked, "where is Didia tonight?"

"Helping in the kitchen. She will come out later, when the place fills up."

"Would you be kind enough to tell her Uncle Felix is here?" I produced a bronze *quadrans* and held it to the girl.

She took it, nodded and left.

We sipped the wine as we waited. True to my expectation from the clientele, this was a decent vintage, spiced lightly with honey and thyme. The owner knew his customers would not settle for less.

We didn't have to wait long. Didia passed by bearing a tray

loaded with small plates of pickles and distributed them among the guests. On her way back to the kitchen she stopped at our table and laid a plate of olives down. “Couldn’t stay away?” she winked at me.

“Not from your blue eyes. Tell me, though, has Zymaxis arrived yet? I was rather hoping to speak to him.”

She frowned. “He’s bad, that one, thoroughly bad. But that is your business. No, he is not here. He usually arrives later, though they seclude themselves downstairs well before midnight, when their chanting begins.” She shuddered.

I took out a *sestertius* and left it on the table. “Please point him out to me, when he comes.”

She took the coin, hoisted her tray and left without another word. Borax and I remained at our table, sipping slowly and keeping an eye on the back stairway.

After a short while, when it looked like no one was coming or going to the downstairs room, I got up, stretched, scratched myself, and told Borax, “I am going to look for the latrines, will be right back.”

I went to the rear of the house. As I was walking past the kitchen, a large man wearing a dark blue tunic came out and headed towards the main room. He looked me up and down and said “This is the private section. If you’re looking for the latrines, it’s out the front door, around the corner to the right and twenty paces down the alley.”

I had to make a quick decision. Since he appeared like he might be the proprietor, I lowered my voice and said, “Actually, my good man, I have heard your fine establishment holds the most excellent private parties. I was hoping to see if I can get an invitation.” I jingled the purse inside my tunic.

His face relaxed and registered interest now, but he replied, “Tonight is booked up. Private party. Come tomorrow — it’s pretty boys’ night; or three days hence we have an open banquet when I am sure we could find you something you will like.”

I put my head closer to his. “I have heard about special parties, not your usual orgies. I was told that the *Nones* are the nights to come.”

His face became inscrutable. “I do not know who you are. If you give me your name and stay in the main room, I will let... the organiser

know that you are interested. He will either contact you or not. But you must not come here again without invitation. Now return to the tavern and wait there.”

I went back to my table and sat down with Borax. Crassitius had given me a true professional, not your usual drunken ex-gliadiator, for I saw his wine cup was still untouched. And suddenly I felt this would be handy tonight.

We sat in our corner table for what seemed like an hour. We kept sipping very slowly from the spiced wine, nibbling on olives, pickled onions and radishes. The place filled up with what I presumed were the usual clientele. A mix of respectable men on the way back from their day of labour, and cheap human entertainment starting their night’s work.

One by one I saw men going to the rear of the house, nod to the proprietor on the way, and head down the stairs. I counted seven, all men. They all seemed affluent by the cut of their tunics and hair, the youngest in his late twenties, the oldest about fifty. Occasionally, I caught Didia’s eye, but she always shook her head slightly and moved on.

Sometime during our third cup of watered wine, I saw a man come in and walk straight to the back room. He was short, completely bald, tanned skin, of lithe and graceful build. In his late thirties or early forties, I estimated. He wore a dark green tunic, embroidered with gold thread in a classic pattern of squares around the edges. On his waist was a leather belt, beautifully tooled and with shining brass buckle and studs. Even before Didia gave me an urgent look, I knew this must be Zymaxis.

As the man walked to the back stairwell, the proprietor (whose name I never learnt) poked his head out and went after him. I saw them standing at the top of the stairs going down, heads together conferring in whispers. The proprietor nodded in my direction, and Zymaxis turned his gaze on me. Our eyes locked and held together for a long moment.

Without averting his gaze, Zymaxis cut off the other man with a wave of his hand and walked to my table. “I understand that you have

been asking about me,” he said, without introduction.

I held his gaze for a moment before answering. His eyes were pale green, accentuated by his tunic. His voice was clear and resonant, his accent cultured. He gave me the impression of an intelligent and charismatic man. “I believe I have,” I answered.

“Leave your slave here and come.” He turned around and walked to the back of the tavern. I got up and followed.

Before we went down the stairs he ducked into an empty private dining room, located close to the kitchen. He faced me and said, “We can speak a bit more openly here. Now, who are you and what have you heard about me?”

“My name is Felix, sometimes called Felix the Fox. I have heard of you from a friend of a friend of a friend. I have heard rumours of ancient rites and found it most intriguing.”

“And why should I be interested in you?”

“I make my way in the world in the service of others, although that was not always so. I used to study in the Collegium Incantatorum, until my family’s fortune was lost and I was expelled in shame. I am still keenly interested in such matters, though, and have always been drawn to the real powers that flow throughout our world. I make my living as a fox, a diviner of occult matters and items for others. However, if what I heard was correct, you have a better vision of both power and future.”

He gave me a calculating look for a long moment. “Interesting. What you might be referring to sounds highly illegal to me. What is to stop me from reporting you?”

“If what I have heard is true, you will be avoiding the officials just as much as me. If what I have heard is *not* true, they would hardly care for either you or me. But if what I have heard is, indeed, true, then you are looking for men like me.” That last bit was a guess, of course, but if he was running an underground cabal he would no doubt find my story intriguing enough to be considered.

He thought a moment further, and I could see on his face when he made his decision. “You are direct, I will give you that. And I appreciate directness. Come,” and he walked out of the room and turned down the stairs.

* * *

The room under the tavern looked quite different than it had that morning. Lamps were lit in the sconces, giving me a better view of the lurid frescoes. All the couches and tables were pushed against the walls. Two tripod tables were set aside from the others, close to the doorway. One had only a simple black cloth on it. The other had some items but I could not discern what they were, for they were covered with a similar black cloth. And, very noticeably, in the centre of the room hung a single rose from the ceiling — the whole affair was done *sub rosa*, in secret. Yet my skin did not tingle and I could sense no enchantments present.

The seven men I had seen before going down were waiting here. None were sitting, all standing talking amongst themselves. The conversation stopped as soon as we stepped in, and all eyes turned on me.

“Friends,” said Zymaxis as he walked to the gathered men, “this is Felix. He has put himself forward as a candidate for our little group.”

As Zymaxis was talking, I took a better look at the other men present. The man to my left seemed like a merchant. In his mid-thirties, wearing a very fine, red tunic richly embroidered with gold thread under a pristine white toga. Fashionably barbered reddish hair, soft hands. He wore a larger than usual iron citizen’s ring, showing an ornate seal.

The next man to him was taller and slimmer, standing erect. In his early forties, fit, with close-cropped dark hair, greying at the temples. An inscrutable look was on his face as he studied me. I imagined him to be a military man. With his gold senator’s ring, he must have been high-ranking.

To his left again stood a man with wind-weathered face and arms. Short, tanned, wiry muscles, legs slightly apart. Wearing a grey tunic of a style favoured by sailors. Clearly a seaman, though I was not sure if navy or of the merchant fleet. He projected self-assurance and I imagined him to be a captain.

Somewhat behind Zymaxis stood a mousy little man, with thin brown hair and blue eyes. I estimated him to be in his early forties as well. I could see some scars up on his arms, though they were mostly

covered by his well-tailored tunic and toga. His manner was very passive, and even though he rarely looked directly into my eyes, I saw them sparkle with intelligence. He wore an iron ring and a *pileus* — the small conical felt cap of manumitted slaves.

The next man in the circle was the youngest, in his late twenties. A trained *incantator*, that much was obvious from the trappings of his belt and the wide saffron-coloured stripe on the right side of his tunic. He wore his hair longer and sported a thin jawline beard that was currently fashionable with the young rich boys of our city. His citizen's ring was of gold, indicating he was from a family of senatorial rank. I tagged him as a recalcitrant son of a senator.

The last but one man was the only one not wearing a citizen's ring besides Zymaxis. He was in his mid-thirties, dark of skin and fair of eyes and hair. A long, straight nose. Classic Hellican look, even without the Hellican pleated chiton he was wearing. He looked at me with open curiosity.

The last man, immediately to my right, was another *incantator*. He wore an iron ring and a good but slightly faded tunic, and was the oldest and the shabbiest of them all. In his early fifties, with straggling hair covering his balding pate from one side to the other, and greasy stains on his tunic. He gave me an unkind look, and my reaction to him was similar.

With varied backgrounds, all were men of middle years, successful, and — I was feeling certain — hungry for more.

"As is common with us," Zymaxis continued, "there will be no introductions as of yet. Only should Felix be chosen for initiation will he be welcome into our circle.

"You all have been initiated; you all are dedicated to our cause. You are all exasperated at the stifling choke-hold the collegia maintain over our city. This arcane ruling by the archaic collegia is preventing honest citizens from pursuing knowledge, success, power! We, men of action, men of the morrow, are looking to shed the yoke placed upon us and rise once more. Egretia is being held back from its true potential, and it is up to us to free it from its shackles and lead it to a bright future, taking its rightful place as the leader of nations — with us at its head!"

Zymaxis paused and drew a deep breath. “And as you all have pledged and proven your dedication and loyalty to our cause, so now must Felix.” He turned his gaze on me, and so did the others. “You are now required to prove both your merit and dedication. As with all other initiates, you need to complete a task to show your value. Considering your self-proclaimed expertise of being a fox, sniffing items of enchantment, I would task you to provide our group with an object of significant value. Not mere riches, but an item of learning, of purpose. You must ascertain and procure something that is declared contraband by our collegia, an item that can be used in the pursuit of knowledge by educated people, that can further us in our cause. What such a thing shall be, I will leave to you. My only advice is that you should think carefully. It must not be a trinket or a trivial enchantment that can be bought on the black market by any common criminal, but something to impress the future directors of Egretia’s greatness.

“Once you have procured such an object you will return here and present it to us. If we accept your offering, we will ask you to swear your allegiance to our cause. You will take a sacred and binding blood oath together with all of us. This oath cannot be broken save by death, and will mark you as one of us. From that moment on you will devote all your life, possessions and skills to our group and our cause.”

All eyes were focused on me at that moment. Zymaxis had a zealot’s glow on his face, the soldier and captain inscrutable as before. The boy and the foreigner seemed interested in my reaction, the freedman similarly but with sidelong looks. The merchant to my left and the ageing *incantator* to my right both had unkind looks in their eyes, not openly hostile but disapproving and unsympathetic.

“Now, then,” said Zymaxis, “will you accept those terms?”

The task, while I had no definite idea at that time what I could use to gain their trust, did not concern me much. I have been in the business of ferreting information and small items of power for long enough, and have learnt enough from my father’s dealership in antiquated and enchanted paraphernalia, to know how to approach traders in illicit contraband.

The blood oath did worry me, though. These things can be bind-

ing, and who knew what else would Zymaxis add to it? I could end up completely in his thrall. Such oaths can be mutual to ensure people remain true to each other, but the more sinister of these binding charms affect the bound profoundly, with complete subjugation of their will. The other members did not seem to suffer any of those effects, though that could just mean a more subtle enchantment. Could I risk such an oath?

In the end, of course, I did not have much choice. With all their eyes upon me I accepted their terms with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. Reactions were congruent with their previous dispositions, from smiling acceptance, to guarded nods, to barely masked disapproval.

“You have chosen wisely,” Zymaxis told me with a smile. “I am confident that you will complete the tasks and pass our tests. However, now we must ask you to leave us. Until such time as you have been initiated into our circle you may not attend our meetings. Ah, here is our good host, Titus Septimius! Right on time.”

I looked behind and saw the proprietor walk in carrying a large silver tray bearing two pitchers. Rather uncommonly, both pitchers contained wine, and not wine and water. Behind him walked in Didia, carrying cups, bread, and shallow bowls of olive oil.

Septimius nodded to Zymaxis, placed the tray on the clear table and left the room with Didia. He gave me a curious sidelong glance as he walked past me, but made no comments.

“One last thing before you leave us on your quest, Felix.” Zymaxis went to the two tables at the side of the group. He uncovered the objects hidden so far by the black cloth. I saw three little lidded jars, like the *pyxidae* women use to store their cosmetics. He opened one of them and took out a pinch of what looked like ground herbs, which he dropped into one of the cups. He poured wine on top of the herbs, and some into another cup. He picked up both cups and gently sloshed the spiced wine as he walked back towards me. “This is not yet time for your blood oath, of course, but you would understand that we must still carry our meetings in secret while the oppressive collegia remain in control. I am certain that you will prove yourself dedicated to our cause, however as a simple precaution I would ask you to drink

from this cup before you leave us.”

He extended the cup with the spiced wine towards me, and I took it from his hands. He raised his own cup. “To free knowledge and a better Egretia!” he exclaimed and drank deeply. All eyes were on me.

“To free knowledge and a better Egretia!” I repeated and drank from my cup.

* * *

Borax must have been quite concerned at the look on my face, for after I climbed back to the main room I hastily made my way straight out of the tavern. He followed me outside and saw me pushing my fingers down my throat, retching and vomiting repeatedly on the corner, until nothing was left in my stomach.

I walked shakily to the nearest crossroads, and rinsed my mouth with water from the public fountain. Only then did I respond to Borax’s concerns about my health.

We went back to the Dented Skull and sat at our previous table. I wanted to think about the events that have just transpired, but I also wanted to remain close to where the cabal met. By now the place was quite busy, with patrons drinking, eating, and socialising; with whores scouting for customers and thieves scouting for victims. As we sat down, I fished out of my tunic the small pouch I always carry with me and took out a few herbs of my own. I chewed on them slowly and washed down their bitter taste with wine.

Zymaxis must be a *veneficator*, an *incantator* that specialises in the *veneficium* branch of enchantment, concerned with herbs and poisons. If he was using concoctions and potions to achieve his ends, it would explain why I could not feel any magic taking place here. Any extra enchantment required to bring out the potency of his admixtures, could have been performed well in advance and in another place. I could only hope that my immediate expulsion of the treated wine together with the antidote herbs I was chewing would eliminate any effect Zymaxis intended.

I didn’t want to stay here long, however. When Didia next

walked by I drew her close and pretended to request her favours again. From the corner of my eye I saw the proprietor shrug and nod upstairs at her.

Once in her room, I held her hands from taking off her tunic and looked into her grey eyes. “Lovely as the idea is, right now I need to ask you something. I will pay you just the same. I saw you bring the wine to Zymaxis’ gathering. Have you noticed the three little boxes, the *pyxidae* he keeps on the table next to the wine?”

She nodded and I continued. “I came in the room together with him, but the boxes were already there. Does he keep them here?”

“My master keeps the *pyxidae* locked for him in a special trunk, and Zymaxis is the only one allowed to open them. He comes and refills them at times, usually on the day before their meetings.”

“Do you have access to them? Could you get me a sample of their contents?”

“No! My *dominus* would beat me! He keeps the chest locked in his room, and even if I could open it, if my master caught me poking in his room he would have me whipped!” She was shaking.

“No, we wouldn’t want that.” I hugged her and waited until she calmed down.

“I will have to think up another way to get them, then. My employer is most interested in their contents, and would be quite generous.” I hummed for a bit. “Say, do you ever help set up or clean the room after their little gatherings?”

“The master sets it up in the evenings. He has specific directions from Zymaxis, and sometimes they have... other things there,” she shuddered again. “Sometimes, though, if *dominus* is too busy or just too tired when they are done, he will send me down there to clean up before he puts the boxes and paraphernalia away. This is how I know he locks them.”

“Well, now, that suggests a plan. I could tire out your master with songs and drinks. If he sends you down to clean after tonight, will you be able to steal a small quantity of the contents of each of the *pyxidae*? Even a pinch would be enough. My employer would be most grateful, and reward accordingly for all your risks.”

In the end the promise of monies that would make a significant

contribution to her freedom fund made the most impression. I also promised her ten *denarii* for every name of the cabal she overheard. I left her five silver *denarii* as a down payment for the herb samples and the names.

With the money on the table and my hands around her shoulders, we ended up in bed again.

Back at the main room, Borax was patiently waiting for me at our table. Rather than risk drawing attention to myself by staying there, we settled our account and left. Out on the street I outlined my plan to Borax. He wasn't a natural actor, but the role suited him well enough.

We started to wander the streets of the Clivi Inferior, like two old chums gone carousing. Whenever we passed others on the street we discussed, loudly, the merits of the wine and whores at The Dented Skull. We marvelled at that randy old goat who was marrying the sweet teenager tomorrow, and was so happy he was buying drinks for everyone present there. We told each other of the serving maids at the Dented Skull, their relative merits and measurements. We even sat for a drink at a few other taverns, drank the wine, complained bitterly on how lacklustre it was compared to the one served at the Dented Skull, and declared loudly that we were making our way back to that Elysian place of sweet wine and kindly prostitutes. Finding celebrants was not hard that night, as this was the first day of the *Megalenses Ludi* and a great number of people were out and about looking for thrills.

By the time we circled our way back to the Dented Skull, it was packed. New customers were eagerly ordering wines and food, giving the local ladies a brisk night, running into old friends and colleagues, and generally making merry. The proprietor must have been surprised at the sudden turnout, though he was too busy to really care once the money started flowing in.

Borax and I waited mostly outside, near the public fountain at the square up the alley. Only occasionally did we go to take a look. As the night progressed, so did the revelry. Whenever things seemed in danger of calming down, we found a way to get a round of drinks to all the patrons without drawing attention. I had not seen *Zymaxis* or any

of the other members of his cabal leave the tavern, but with the crowds that were there I might have missed them. Of Didia I barely saw more than a glance, as she was kept busy with the night's activities.

It was well past midnight when affairs started to calm down. The patrons were getting tired and the whores were getting frayed. By two hours before the dawn the Dented Skull was mostly deserted. When I peeked inside there was no sign of Septimius or Didia, and only one of the other maids remained, cleaning up the place.

I waited patiently with Borax in the alley outside the Dented Skull. A while later Didia came out, emptying a bucket into the gutters, looking haggard. A square of folded linen and a small pouch full of coins quickly exchanged hands without a word, and Didia went back inside. There was nothing left for Borax and me but to head back home.

CHAPTER VIII

I awoke late and spent what little remained of the following day analysing the samples Didia had gotten for me from Zymaxis' *pyxidae*. I had no way of telling which one he had put in my drink, so I was interested in all three samples to see what else he might have used. My knowledge of herbs, poisons and potions was limited to practical titbits, and I could not hope to match a trained *veneficator*. I ran all the tests I could think of on the tiny samples Didia had gone to the risk of getting for me. I detected no poisons, only mild hallucinogenics, which relieved me somewhat. I also did not detect any enchantment, however, *veneficium* doesn't necessarily involve a raw power called into the potion. Besides, as much as I hate to admit it, it could just as easily have been too subtle for my meagre skills.

I needed to find more information, and wanted to carefully consider my options first. While I had met with Zymaxis and his cabal I had still known very little about them, and in fact hadn't even known any of the names of the other members. Asking around after a military man with an unknown rank or affiliation of an unnamed senatorial family, or of an ageing, failing *incantator* of unspecified speciality and with bad manners would not get me anywhere. The answers I was likely to get would be "aren't all of them like that?"

And what if these men heard I was asking after them, and decided they did not like this turn of events? Of course, some of them

might be asking after me regardless; if I didn't try to find out about them I would be facing an unknown cabal, completely in the dark if they took exception to me and chose to strike. I was beginning to feel paranoid and washed my face in the fountain to cool my head.

That left asking around after Zymaxis himself. The name was foreign, vaguely Assyrican, though he spoke perfect *Quirite* with hardly an accent. I had learnt about him from Caeso's friends and from Mahatixa, and both times only in relation to The Dented Skull. I had not seen him or any of the other members of the cabal leave last night, so I had not been able to follow any of them. And so again, a dearth of leads. The proprietor of the Dented Skull was in Zymaxis' employ, and my feeling was that he would not talk to me — and would alert him in detail later. I also felt that I had extracted all the information I could out of Didia.

So I had to consider other options available to me, in addition to fishing out about the men of the cabal. For my task, I was told their next meeting there would be on the night eight days before the *Kalends of Maius*, the free night between the festivals of the *Parilia* and the *Vinalia*, sixteen days from today. The one after that again on the *Nones of Maius*. They might meet at other times, or they might not, but those were the days I was told to show up to impress them with my solution to their puzzle.

I paced around the unkempt peristyle garden in my old and empty house, mocked by the grinning faun and his enormous phallus.

Still, a man such as Zymaxis, a man with charisma, with an agenda, a man who managed to recruit — and possibly kill — from all walks of Egretian life, a man like that must surely leave tracks. I left my house determined to sniff them out.

* * *

I started with my friend Akhirabus, herbalist and specialist embalmer. His shop was located near to the Porta Fulvia on the street of the embalmers. When walking down that street between all the shops of those whose business is the end of life, one is accosted by

many fragrances. Funeral wreaths, fresh flowers to lay about corpses, unguents and balsams for the preparation of dead bodies — all very aromatic, to mask the unsavoury smells accompanying death.

When I entered the shop of Akhirabus my nose was blatantly assaulted, like a green recruit facing his first enemy cavalry charge. It was not so much that the smells were strong or clashing — although there was plenty of that, too — but just the sheer variety of them was overwhelming. With every small draught, with every step, with every turn of the head, new heady smells and perfumes clamoured for my attention. Akhirabus was not a mere embalmer, he was a master herbalist as well, and his shop was stocked with amazingly varied supplies from all over the known world.

Happily, I found Akhirabus on the premises, and he greeted me warmly as I entered. “Thank you for the commission, my friend. The money was good, but more than that — the interest! I have not had so much fun with corpses for a long time. In my business, human innards start to all look the same after a while. But this! An intriguing puzzle. You Egretians do not like tattooing yourself, and place so many restrictions on the *magia vita* as you call it, so I rarely get such interesting corpses to prepare.” His jet-black eyes were twinkling, set in an old and wrinkled face, brown leathery skin covering his head without a single hair to be seen. “Your friend with the funny name — ‘Brew-in’ — and I worked together on the young man’s remains. He is a professional, too, it was a pleasure see him remove the tattoos.”

“What can you make of it? Have you seen the likes of this before?”

“Seen? Oh no, not seen. But heard. A long time ago in the old country. It reminds me of tales by my old teacher, tales of ancient rituals transforming the *ib*, the heart. None of them have been practised for aeons, and I fear the knowledge might be lost. For good reason, too. You saw what happened to the poor boy, his whole *ka* was torn horribly from his body,” said Akhirabus.

“It reminded me of something I had read about before, in the libraries of the Collegium. It was named the Rite of Pelegrinus.”

“Pelegrinus, Amon-Ib-Khat — names change, the essence does not. How did the child become involved?”

“That is what I am trying to find out. I was hoping you could help me.” I said.

“I am afraid my knowledge of these matters is flawed, and I am most ashamed that I cannot offer you more than you already know.” He shook his head in genuine sadness as he spoke this.

“Would you make a guess as to what was required?” I asked. “Even with flawed knowledge, your opinion is still better than anybody else’s.”

“You flatter me,” Akhirabus said. “For what it’s worth, I would advise that you should not limit yourself to the specific ritual you mentioned. Search for the essence. The peak of a mountain can be reached by many paths. The mountain is still the same, but the view on the way up may be different.”

I asked Akhirabus for help with the spice mixtures I’d gotten at the Dented Skull as well. Herbalism being his passion, he was delighted at yet another puzzle, although he was not able to tell me anything I did not already know. “If you leave them with me,” he told me, “I will be able to examine them with more care later. These things take time, you understand. The samples are small, and I will need to carefully consider each test, use them most sparingly with the utmost care. If you come back in a few days, I will tell you what I find.”

* * *

This was the *Nones of Avrilis*, the fifth day of the month named after *Fortuna Virilis*, and the city was on holiday due to the *Megalenses Ludi*. *Virilis* is the aspect of *Fortuna* dedicated to hiding the imperfections of women from men. Only fitting that the games dedicated to the Great Mother would be held then. These games were not like the usual circus games with chariot races and wrestling bouts; after the opening ceremonies of discordant chanting by self-flagellating eunuchs, most of the celebrations consisted of theatre plays. Everywhere people were attending theatres, from formal Egreitian masked dramas and comedies to the most debased street mimes with bare breasts and bottoms. A cultural melting pot at its best, as the Great Mother is not

an Egretian presence.

In this atmosphere, I decided to spend the rest of the daytime on locating Mahatixa's troupe and querying her in further details about Zymaxis.

Easier said than done. I spent hours walking streets full of happy revellers, chasing rumours of a foreign troupe with the sign of the sphinx. Mahatixa's troupe remained elusive. Whomever I asked, from tavern owners to sailors to passing citizens in the street, had either never heard of them or swore on his mother's shade that they had just been spotted on the other side of the city from where I was. There was no shortage of mime troupes in Egretia during the festivals of the *Megalenses Ludi*, many apparently even with dancing dark-skinned beauties, though the one I was after was nowhere to be found. After walking for miles around the city and visiting neighbourhoods from the fancy to the slums, when it was getting late at night I gave up.

In between chasing the entertainers, I attempted some discreet queries about Zymaxis. Most people were in a happy and festive mood, and I tried my best not to stand out like a diseased facial wart. I stopped at taverns where I knew seditious elements visited, I asked friends known to follow the town gossip, I bought wine and chatted, asking oblique questions and getting oblique answers. Nothing concrete, no rumours of an Assyrican, *veneficator* or otherwise, dissatisfied with the current regime. I could not be too open with my questions, and thus did not get informative answers.

I ended up feeling like a dog chasing its tail, trying to talk to people I had already spoken to and get them to reveal things they probably did not know.

* * *

I trudged up the hill back to my home. I was tired from little sleep the night before and much walking today, and knew I had a lot more pounding of pavements to do over the following days. I opened my front door and stepped into the vestibule. Something did not feel right. I put my hand inside my tunic and clutched my dagger's hilt. I

closed the door quietly behind me and walked into the house.

I stepped into the atrium and froze. Sitting on folding chairs and facing each other were Dascha and Araxus, staring and giving each other the evil eye, looking for all intents and purposes like two rival mangy cats hissing and spitting.

I relaxed. A little.

“He pushed right in, *domine!* He said he has a message for you, but if he’s a messenger I am a young nymph.” Dascha sniffed in indignation.

“Dascha, this is Araxus. He used to come here quite often. You should remember him.”

She peered at him incredulously. “Araxus? But he looks as old as me, *domine*. That can’t be your old friend, can it?” Araxus scratched his side under his filthy garment and chewed on the end of his unkempt beard. Dascha turned away in disgust. “I never knew what you saw in him, young *dominus*.”

“It’s all right, Dascha, I can address this from now. You can go back to your duties.”

She went away, shooting a last disgusted, spiteful look at Araxus over her shoulder.

“Dascha said you have a message for me. Did you find something?” I said, with vague hopes that my attempt at trusting him would not be frustrated.

He looked up at me with his green right eye, while his left black eye kept following Dascha. “It’s the light, don’t you see?”

I stared at him blankly. “What?”

“It’s the light. The light! It must be the light. That’s the only way, the light. Surely you see it?” he pleaded.

“What are you babbling about?”

I got nothing coherent out of him. Araxus kept babbling something about the light, how bright it was, how it distracted him, how he could not look at it, how surely I should be able to see how it was related. I couldn’t. I had no time or patience for his mad ramblings; all he did was remind me of Helena. Some days he was lucid and sharp as he was in our youth. Some days his mind was gone, a dangerous raving lunatic. Eventually I ejected him none too kindly from my home. A

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bad ending to the day.

CHAPTER IX

I got up the following day, the day after the *Nones* of *Avrilis*, five days after starting the investigation, in a foul mood. Running into Araxus last night had resulted in sleep plagued by bad dreams again. Feet sore to match my head and heart, I set out early to try to chase leads.

The day did not disappoint my low expectations. I started by trying to locate Caeso's friends, to ask them again about Zymaxis or Mahatixa. Drusus, it appeared, had sailed off on an errand for his *magister* at the Collegium Mercatorum. Of Caeso's two other friends, Porcius and Lutatius, there was no sign. The door slave at the Collegium was as snooty as ever, and no bribe offered seemed to satisfy him. I had to hasten away with my tail between my legs when he called the guards.

Trying a different tack, on the way back from the Forum I stopped at another acquaintance, Brewyn the tattoo master. His shop, if one can call it that, was at the rear of another shop of sundries in the Subvales, where the large tenements and stews of Egretia were. His clientele was made up of other Pictonii, Arbarii and Capilanii — all the people we subjugated, who mark their skins in a very un-Egretian manner.

I walked into the outer shop, walked past the snoozing elderly man on his rickety chair, past the bags and shelves haphazardly loaded

with miscellaneous sundries and supplies, nodded to the elderly wife at the counter who gave me a sour look, and passed through the curtain to the back room. Brewyn was sitting with his back to me, the blue woad tattoos on his neck and muscular arms peeking out from under his light tunic. A large man in his thirties, his dun-coloured hair showed no signs of receding.

He was working carefully on a man sitting in a chair in front of him. “Wait your turn,” he said without turning.

I stood obediently at the door, leaning on the frame and watching him work. He was finishing a design on the man’s face, an intricate spiralling maze of lines and dots. He had the lines traced in place, and was carefully pricking the skin with a sharp fish-bone needle. After each section, he daubed at the blood and then rubbed the blue ink into the wounds.

“There,” Brewyn said as he straightened up. “Give it a few days, and rub the ointment daily. You’ll be able to go back to your family in Capirica, and no one will be the wiser about the marks your *dominus* left on you here.”

The man thanked him, picked up the small *pyxis* with unguents from Brewyn, paid generously, and left. Brewyn finally turned and lifted his eyes to me. “Oho! Felix the Fox! I thought you might come by. Here, have a seat,” he indicated the client’s chair.

“You liked the commission I sent your way, then?” I asked as I sat down and accepted a cup of wine.

“Indeed, indeed. A very peculiar case. Took me the most of the night to defuse the *stercus* that the young *mentula* had on him. What did that rich *cunnus* get into? I thought you Egretians despised tattoos.”

“You know we do. I have been hired by his father to find out exactly what mess he got himself embroiled in. I was hoping you could tell me something about it.”

“I could tell you it wasn’t your regular corner-store *fellator* who gave him those. Those were power tattoos — *stigmata*. But you knew that, didn’t you?” He looked into my eyes with a half-smile. “That is why you had him ask for me to work with the embalmer.”

“I thought it would be prudent. Did you recognise the design, or the method?” I asked.

“No. The design was detailed enough to look... specific, though I have never seen a combination of lines and arrangements such as this. I tattoo people of all nations who pass through Egretia, or at least notice them on people more than most. And I thought I saw them all! However, that was not a style I have ever come across.”

“And the method?”

“It was a reasonably clean hand, though not a professional. Definitely not a hand I recognised. I would say that whoever did this probably practised some on animal skin but does not tattoo for a living. I could see more hesitant lines at the edge of the pattern, growing bolder and surer as the work progressed.”

“And the power, could you tell how it was done?”

“After it was completed, if you ask me. I have drawn a few power *stigmas* myself, albeit not this big. There are several ways of getting the *magia* into them, some from the beginning, some at the end. It depends on the method used and the effect desired. This one... this one was drawn first, and then juiced up with a lightning bolt. It was still crackling on the poor *stercus*' corpse. I had some fun getting rid of the residues, I shit you not.”

I sipped my wine and gathered my thoughts. “What can you tell me that will help me track the ones who did this?”

“I don't know the hand or the style, but... the ink for those tattoos was not regular woad, nor any of the dyes I have encountered in my many years of tattooing. That much I am certain of. If you get me the recipe for the ink, perhaps I could help you track who might deal with those items, and who might have the skill to prepare it. There will not be many found in Egretia, and exotic materials could be traced by their suppliers.”

I thanked him, stood up and promised to return when I discovered the recipe.

“Why don't you let me tattoo you, eh?” Brewyn asked me. “I can do you some nice design, under the toga. No one will ever know except the ladies you entertain. I can even put some power into them, so those ladies will be guaranteed entertainment,” he said with an awful leer.

“*Mentulam caco*,” I declined.

* * *

After a hasty lunch of bread stuffed with overly spiced pork that did more to my indigestion than my hunger, I changed tack and again went after anyone who might have heard of Zymaxis' cabal. The members of his little group had come from all walks of life. An army officer, a naval officer, two *incantatores* — one young and one old — a merchant, a freed slave and a Hellican. Two from obvious senatorial-rank families, four of regular citizen status, and one non-citizen foreigner. All of them, however, seemed well-off, educated people. All with a grudge against society, if they subscribed to Zymaxis' rants.

I tried to put myself in Zymaxis' shoes. If I were starting an illegal cabal to stage a coup, where would I find such men for support? This was certainly not something I had previously ever thought to do. I tried to go by way of elimination. None of his recruits were low criminals, so I discarded those aspects of society. Neither did they seem to me exceedingly rich nor high ranking, as those tend to resist change, with more to lose than to gain from a social upheaval. I flattered myself that my lack of ideas was because I was an upright citizen who always supported the traditions of our republic, but the cynic inside my head laughed at me.

I had on the first day of my investigation sounded out old contacts for possible necromantic connections. This yielded one lead, the library in Ephemezica that Sosius had asked me to review, in the belief that it might contain ancient scrolls with knowledge of *magia vita terminalis*. Would approaching them again, now on the subject of social unrest, produce any different results? Or would it land me in trouble, asking so many dubious questions?

The other matter troubling me was that if I wanted to join the cabal, I had to fulfil their task. In between searching for information about the cabal members, I gave thought to what I could impress them with to gain acceptance. And here, too, a dearth of options: I did not have the time to really devote to it, and buying something outright would have been both too cost prohibitive and too obvious.

Thus, when I saw no other leads, I visited the Forum and gossiped with the old chinwaggers, trying to suss out any rumours of

civil unrest and of the political bickering and manoeuvring within the Senate. Were there any factions more dissatisfied than usual? Were any names associated with shady dealings in *magia*? Were there any rumours of interesting items being discovered, procured or moved around? Did the descriptions of the men I had seen ring a bell, sound familiar?

Nothing, or at least nothing more promising than gossip so wildly speculative that even at my desperate state I could not credit it.

I found this oblique way of investigations, this constant misdirection, of trying to ask questions without truly ever reaching the heart of the matter, all very frustrating.

The funeral for Caeso was due the next morning. I decided that if I could not come up with any promising avenue for investigation by then, I would take Sosius up on his offer and visit the library in Ephemezica, and try to find information about the rite that Caeso had undergone. Even if all I found were ceremonies of a similar vein and not the specific rite, it might still provide me with insights into the requirements and preparations, which could turn into leads as I retraced his preparations. I would have something to give to Akhirabus and Brewyn, who could point me further in the right direction. And if I got lucky, I might even find a scroll of sufficient value and interest to be my entry pass to the cabal!

I also resolved to visit the island of Kebros, as Caeso had seemingly experienced something there that made him come back with renewed vigour. Understanding the steps he had taken on his way from the start would help me understand the end of his path, as well.

* * *

The next morning I got up early, broke fast with millet porridge sweetened with dates, put on my toga and went to pay my last respects to Caeso. A crowd was already gathered outside Corpio's mansion on the Septentrionali. I joined the queue of people waiting to go inside.

Caeso's body was displayed on the traditional bier in the atrium, feet facing the door, laid at an angle so that his face was visible to

onlookers. He was dressed in a toga over a long tunic, hiding the tattoos or what remained of them. His face looked calm, a testament to the skill of Akhirabus, and in his mouth the traditional coin. The small scars my blade had left at the sides of his jaw were hardly visible, concealed with makeup. Around him were arranged many fragrant flowers and boughs, though they could not completely mask the reek. Akhirabus had done an excellent job, considering he'd gotten to him quite late.

I shuffled back out with the rest of the gathered people and waited for the funeral to start. Around mid-morning the procession finally embarked on its way. As Caeso came from a rich family of senatorial rank, he was given every custom and rite, even though he was still too young to have achieved much by himself.

First came the specially trained musicians hired for the day. They led the procession with deep brass trumpeting alerting all that a dead body was passing. After the musicians came the professional mourners. Women dressed in rags, crying, wailing, in tears, pulling their hair, vocalising the abject misery of a family who could not participate in such unrespectable behaviour.

After the mourners came the mimes. Special actors, they wore the wax masks of the notable ancestors of Caeso, acting and mimicking their behaviour in life. I have never met them of course, but from the discussion of the people around me the actors had an uncanny talent that reminded everybody of past members of this great family.

The body came next, borne by friends and relatives, lying in state on the same bier as before. A formal event, the two fasces-bearing *lictors* of his father preceded the bier, while Corpio walked alone behind it. Other close relatives and friends followed a few steps behind Corpio. I saw Typheus walking amongst them, as well, showing his respect to his master. I looked at Corpio, trying to discern his mood; however, since he was a professional politician it was hard to tell how much was genuine and how much was an act. He walked erect, his face sombre, his pace measured. Never smiling, looking ahead, the picture of the respectable, stoic Egretian.

The procession stopped for a short while in the Forum Egretium, and Corpio himself delivered the eulogy. Caeso being a young

lad at the time of his death, there was not much to talk about besides his youth in itself — and his family. A true politician of the eternally scheming Senate, Corpio did weave his own ancestry's greatness into the eulogy, for the benefit of future voters.

After the eulogy came the arduous part of Egretian funerals. From the Forum the procession wound its way up the steep Via Verguvia. The road starts at the Forum and climbs the steep sides of Vergu. Once out of the Porta Alta, the road keeps climbing up the mountain. In ancient times, it was the custom of our people to climb all the way to the top and hold the funerals on a large ledge overlooking the mouth of the volcano. These days, thankfully, most funerals are held a short way out of the city gates, or there would be a lot more funerals when men and women keel over from exertion.

The procession reached its destination on a flat area overlooking the lush valley of the Fulvius and Erratus rivers. A pyre was already waiting, prepared in advance by the undertakers. The musicians, mourners and actors ceased their performance and stood respectfully to the side. The bearers laid the bier upon the ready pyre.

Corpio took up a torch from a waiting slave and held it aloft. He paused and looked at the body of his son, lying peacefully and awaiting passage to the next world. He mumbled the old traditional saying, the one hardly heard these days for the departed,

Tu non estis.

Fortassis ut oblatio carne vestras auxilium reperiat viam lemuri tuum ad Dis.

'You are no more. May the offering of your flesh help your shade find its way to *Dis*'.

I guess everyone becomes sentimental and superstitious at funerals.

He paused again, drew breath and cast the torch onto the pyre. The kindling caught and soon the air was full of swirling particles of ash, the flames dancing higher as they consumed the body of Caeso. Corpio stood for a long while, staring silently into the flames.

On the way down the mountain, I jostled my way gently through the crowd to walk next to Typheus. While the people made their way down, the funerary slaves remained behind and would later collect Caeso's ashes and place them in an urn. The urn would be placed in the family's collective tomb, probably along the Via Fulvia where most old families' tombs were. With the exception of close family and friends, the majority of the people on the mountain that day cared little for Caeso. Most were clients or associates of Corpio, there to show their support and to enjoy the feast and gladiatorial games that were to be held in honour of the deceased later in the day.

As we walked, I saw Typheus being the dutiful secretary, committing to memory the lists of people who came to pay their respects and those who just rejoined the procession back inside the city gates.

"My condolences," I offered.

"Thank you. My master is most grateful for your recommendation of Akhirabus and Brewyn. They were remarkably efficient in removing the... signs on the body and embalming it properly. This will be remembered when the time comes. Which naturally gives rise to the question of your progress? And please, do not be explicit while we are in public."

"I have found a potential group Caeso may have been involved with; however, I have not managed to confirm this yet. To break into their circle I will need more information. I think I mentioned a potential source in Ephemezica. I will also need to retrace the young master's trip to Kebros last year, as some unknown event during his visit there seemed to have set him on this path."

"If you have found a group here, why not hire a few gladiators and break some bones? Surely that would be more expedient."

I looked at him sidelong. He was not looking at me but at the people around us. With so much commotion from the walking crowd, our low voices afforded a modicum of privacy. "The men I saw there," I replied, "will be missed. This approach, while its time may come, is certain to raise much public outcry and bring about unwanted commotion and attention."

"I see. I will speak with my master when this is over. Please come tomorrow."

ASSAPH MEHR

SCROLL II - KEBROS