

Rome

December AD 25

‘MARCUS SALVIUS MAGNUS, I’ve come to you as my patron in the hope that you will right the wrong that is being done to me. In the three years that you have been the Patronus of the Crossroads Brotherhood, here in the South Quirinal district, you have seen that I’ve always paid the not inconsiderable dues owed for your continuing protection in full and on time. I have always provided you with information on my clients, when you have asked for it. I have always offered you free use of my establishment, although you have never availed yourself of that, as my goods are not, I believe, to your taste.’

Magnus sat – leaning back in his chair with his elbows resting on the arms, his hands steepled, his forefingers pressed to his lips – and looked intently at the slight, auburn-haired man standing on the other side of the table as he continued to list examples of his loyalty to the Crossroads Brotherhood, under whose protection lived every trader and resident on the southern slope of the Quirinal Hill. Wearing a tunic of fine linen, outrageously unbelted, and with long, abundant hair tied back in a ponytail, he was of outlandish appearance, but not unattractive – if you liked that sort of thing. Although in his late thirties, his skin was as smooth as a young woman’s, clinging tightly to his fine-boned cheeks and jaw. His sea-grey eyes, lined with traces of kohl, sparkled in the soft lamplight and watered slightly in reaction to the smoky fug produced by the charcoal brazier in the small, low-ceilinged room that Magnus used to transact business with the more important of his many clients. Through the closed door behind him came the muffled shouts and laughter of the well-fuelled drinkers in the tavern beyond.

Magnus had no need to hear of the man’s commitment to him and his brothers, he already knew him to be trustworthy. What interested him was the fact that he felt compelled to affirm it at such length. He was evidently, Magnus surmised, building up to ask a very large favour.

Next to Magnus, his counsellor and second-in-command, Servius, shifted impatiently in his chair and scratched his balding grey hair. Magnus shot him a displeased glance and he settled, stroking the wrinkled skin sagging at his throat with

a gnarled hand. Servius knew full well that a supplicant had the right to fully state his claim – however long-winded – to the protection of the only organization in Rome that would look after the interests of his class.

‘And finally, I am always at your disposal to help repel incursions from the neighbouring Brotherhoods,’ the man eventually concluded, causing Magnus to smile inwardly at the thought of such an effeminate in a street fight, ‘should they try to take what is rightfully ours – as they did, not one hour ago.’

Magnus raised his eyebrows, concern seeping onto his battered, ex-boxer’s face – this was unwelcome news. ‘You’ve been robbed, Terentius? By whom?’

Terentius pursed his lips and almost spat on the floor before remembering where he was. ‘Rivals from the Vicus Patricius on the Viminal.’

‘What did they take?’

‘Two boys, and they cut up two others; one very, very badly.’ Terentius looked down and indicated to his groin. ‘You understand?’

Magnus winced and then nodded thoughtfully. ‘Yeah, I take your meaning. You did right to come to me. Who are these rivals?’

‘They aren’t citizens – they came from the East a few years back.’

Magnus looked at Servius in the hope that his counsellor’s long lifetime’s supply of knowledge of the Roman underworld would extend to these Easterners.

‘They’re Albanii,’ Servius informed them, ‘from the kingdom of Albania in the south-east Caucasus between Armenia and Parthia on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Like a lot of eastern barbarians they’re inordinately fond of boys.’

Magnus grinned. ‘Well, there’s a big market for them here as well. I can understand why they’ve set themselves up in competition to you, Terentius. Have you lost much business to them?’

Terentius looked at the chair in front of him and then back at Magnus who nodded. With a grateful sigh he sat down – not used to being upright for so long, Magnus mused with a hint of a smile.

‘It was fine for the first couple of years,’ Terentius said, taking the cup of wine that Servius offered. ‘They were no threat to me: cheap with substandard, dirty boys who took no pride in their appearance. And besides, the house was more than half a mile away. But what it lacked in class and service it made up for with turnover.’

‘A quick in and out, as it were?’

‘What? Oh yes, I see. Well, they worked their boys hard, day and night and soon were making good money but still they didn’t trouble me as their clients were from the lowest part of society. I kept my elite clientele: senators, equestrians and officers of the Praetorian Guard, some of whom still occasionally ask for me.’ Terentius smiled modestly and smoothed his hair with the palm of his hand.

‘I’m sure that a professional with your experience is a sound investment for an evening,’ Servius commented diplomatically; his hooded eyes betraying no irony.

Terentius inclined his head slightly, acknowledging the compliment. ‘I do not disappoint and neither do my boys.’ He took a delicate sip of wine. ‘However, at the beginning of this year these Albanians decided to move upmarket, competing directly with me; and by this time they could afford to. They bought a more lavish place, close to the Viminal Gate, and began to stock it with the best boys that they could find.

As a result of Tacfarinas’ revolt being crushed last year, the slave markets had started to fill up with the most delicious boys from Africa and, naturally, I wanted my pick of these brown-skinned beauties.’

‘Naturally,’ Magnus agreed.

‘Unfortunately so did my rivals and, regrettably, they too have good taste. I suggested an agreement with them whereby we wouldn’t always bid against each other, but they refused. Even on the very young ones that we train up so they are able to do most things with finesse by the time they’re starting puberty; you can charge a premium for them. I couldn’t let all the best ones go: my stock would have deteriorated over the next few years whilst theirs went up – I would lose my standing. So, I bid over the odds for the best.’

‘Which must have pissed off our Albanian friends no end,’ Magnus observed.

‘Yes, but they still ended up with a goodly amount of beautiful, if over-priced, young flesh, and because the Praetorian Guard’s camp is just outside the Viminal Gate, I started to lose some trade. I had little choice but to lower my prices and do deals: two for the price of one, eat and drink for free on your second consecutive evening, and that sort of thing. But they responded with similar policies and now, because of the huge outlay that we’ve both made this year we’re slowly driving each other out of business and, what’s more, our clients all know it so they bargain even harder when they walk through the door.’

Magnus shook his head, he could see the problem: if Terentius’ business went under then the South Quirinal Brotherhood would lose quite a chunk of its income. ‘And so this evening the Albanians decided to up the stakes and try and force you out.’

‘My men beat them off but the damage to my reputation is done; there were quite a few clients in the house when we were attacked.’

‘So you want me to negotiate a financial settlement with Sempronius, Patronus of the West Viminal?’

Terentius’ pale eyes hardened. ‘No Magnus, this is beyond that now. I want you to get my two boys back and then I want you to destroy these Albanians. Kill them all and their boys. The money that I’ve paid over the years to this Brotherhood entitles me to that.’

Magnus looked at Servius and shrugged. ‘He’s got a point Brother; and besides, we can’t let an attack like that in our area go unpunished – but how do we do it without starting a war?’

The counsellor thought for a few moments looking at Terentius. ‘How well protected are these Albanians?’

‘They have the best protection: the Vigiles. One of their Tribunes has been using the Albanians as a way to ingratiate himself with the Praetorian Guard. So the Vigiles ensure there’s never any trouble near the house and provide an escort for the boys to and from the Praetorian camp should an officer wish to enjoy them in the comfort of his own bed and suchlike services.’

Magnus stared hard at Terentius and sucked in his breath through his teeth. ‘This is a big favour. If we do it we’ll have the Vigiles and the Praetorians as well as the West Viminal Crossroads after us.’

Servius smirked coldly. ‘You’ve got it Brother: If *we* do it. We’ll just have to make sure that it looks like *we* didn’t.’

Magnus turned slowly to his counsellor; a trace of a smile cracked his lips. ‘You’re right. So first we need to get Terentius’ two boys back and bring the matter to an honourable conclusion so everyone can see that we have no more interest in it. Then we set someone else up.’

Terentius bowed his head in gratitude. ‘Thank you, Patronus.’

Servius looked thoughtfully at his fingernails. ‘And who will seem to be responsible for the Albanian’s demise, Brother?’

‘It has to be a group that’s untouchable but one that could logically have done it. People who hate both the Vigiles and the Guard as much as they’re hated by them in return.’

Servius raised his eyebrows. ‘Your old mates?’

‘Exactly; the Urban Cohort. I think that we should call a meeting of all the neighbouring Brotherhood chiefs for tomorrow.’

‘I think so too. And I think that we should take a gift to show our good intentions.’

‘I’ll leave you in charge of the arrangements, Brother.’

‘I’ll send the invitations out immediately. Usual time and place?’

‘Usual time and place.’

MAGNUS WAS WOKEN by a knock on the door of the small room that he called home, above the tavern that was the headquarters of his Brotherhood.

‘Magnus?’ A voice called from beyond the door.

‘Yeah, what is it? It’s still dark,’ Magnus replied sleepily, feeling the warmth of a woman in the bed beside him and trying to recollect her name.

‘It’s Marius, Brother. Servius says that you should come down and take a look at what Sextus, me and some lads brought in just now.’

Magnus grunted and eased out a fart. ‘Alright, bring me a lamp.’

The door swung open and the silhouetted bulk of Marius filled its frame with a lamp in his right hand – his left hand was missing.

‘Leave it on the table, Marius,’ Magnus said sitting up.

As Marius walked across the room Magnus pointed to the sleeping form beside him and mouthed: ‘What’s her name?’

‘Dunno, she’s new, just turned up last night.’

‘Thanks Brother, very helpful. I’ll be down in a moment.’

Magnus slapped the woman’s arse and got out of bed as Marius left the room. ‘Up and at ’em, my girl. I’ve got to go. What do I owe you?’

The woman rolled over sleepily and peered at him through a tangle of well-ravaged black hair. ‘It was a free one, Magnus. Aquilina, remember? I said I’d do you for free if you’d let me work the tavern.’

‘Ah, that’s right, you’re new,’ Magnus replied, trying to remember the conversation through the haze of last night’s wine. ‘Well you’ve passed the test. See old Jovita later and tell her that I said it was fine for you to work here. She watches the girls; you report to her if you leave with a customer or if you’re just giving your favours in a dark corner. We take twenty percent of everything you earn from the tavern, payable in cash the following morning. If you try and cheat us, you’re out on your ear and you won’t find a cock willing to service you in this district ever again, not even for nothing, because you’d be too ugly, if you take my meaning?’

Aquilina smiled getting to her feet – a pretty smile Magnus thought, she should do well. ‘I won’t cheat you, Magnus, I just want to earn my keep,’ she said slipping on her tunic and picking up her discarded loincloth and sandals. She gave him a kiss on the cheek. ‘Any time you want me, I won’t charge.’ Giving him a playful squeeze, she left the room.

Magnus watched her go, frowning.

‘WHAT’VE WE GOT here then that’s so important?’ Magnus asked walking into the tavern’s main parlour that still stank of stale wine, vomit and sweat from the previous evening.

Servius looked up from a scroll of accounts that he was going through on a table in the centre of the room and nodded towards two small figures, bound with sacks over their heads, slumped under the amphorae-lined bar. Marius and Sextus watched over them.

‘Servius sent us fishing,’ Sextus said slowly, as if reciting, ‘and we caught a couple of slippery fish. They’re nice and greasy, especially in certain places.’ He broke into deep, shuddering laughs.

Marius smiled at Magnus, shaking his head in exasperation. ‘He’s been practicing that line for the last hour, Magnus; it ain’t even funny ’cos fish are slimy not greasy, but he can’t see the difference.’

‘Well he’d soon find out if he came across a slimy arse. Let’s have a look at them.’

With Sextus incapacitated by mirth, Marius pulled the sacks off, to reveal two very attractive, but slightly bruised, brown-skinned youths in their early teens. They looked at Magnus with dark, fearful eyes and huddled closer together.

‘The lads did well, Magnus,’ Servius observed.

Magnus was impressed. ‘A couple of the Albanians’ boys? How did you get them Marius?’

‘They was on their way back from a visit to the Praetorian Camp.’

‘But they have an escort of Vigiles.’

‘Yeah, but what do Vigiles do when they see a fire?’

Magnus grinned. ‘First they negotiate a fee with the owner for putting it out; then they put it out.’

‘So I had some of the lads start a fire when we knew they was on their way, and these poor little fish got forgotten about whilst their minders tried to make a profit out of some poor bastard’s misfortune. So Sextus and me decided to escort them home. We just took a few wrong turns, that’s all, and happened to end up here.’

‘Well done lads, such a pretty gift for the meeting later. Lock ’em them up safely until this afternoon and then get the altar ready for the morning sacrifice.’

Marius visibly swelled with pride at the praise and he and Sextus, who was still chuckling fiercely, hauled the terrified boys to their feet and dragged them away.

Magnus turned to Servius. ‘Have the invitations gone out?’

‘Yes Brother, and all the replies are back in. All five of the surrounding *Patroniae* will be there an hour before sunset.’