

ROME, FEBRUARY AD 32

THE STALLIONS' EYES rolled; specks of foam flew from their mouths as they answered their charioteer's call and accelerated down the track. Barrel chests sucked dusty air into their straining lungs whilst pounding hearts pumped blood to the muscles in their legs, which were working to the very limit of their power as they pulled a light chariot seven times around the track. They felt the reins tug back; they slowed, their current sprint over and another corner to be rounded. The inside horse wheeled left in response to a sharp pull on the reins and led his three stable mates, at a speed at which they could just keep their footing, around the turning post at the far end of the *spina*, the central barrier of the Circus Maximus. Feeling another bite of the four-lash whip, they looked up the 350 paces of the dust-clouded straight and they were away again, inciting each other to greater effort in the fury of the race in which they were leading.

Their driver, in the colours of the Green Racing Faction, risked a quick glance over his shoulder to one of the three White chariots, just four paces behind, but gaining; beyond it his Green team-mate drew out into the track in an attempt to pull level with the chasing White. The leading Green driver snatched a small skin of water thrown at him by a boy from his team stationed on the *spina*; he squirted its contents over his dirt-encrusted face and into his parched mouth, discarded it and pulled his team to the right to avoid the mangled wreckage of two chariots, a Blue and a Red. A couple of well-aimed curses, written on folded lead sheets and studded with nails, flew past him as he neared the spectators; pulling back to the right, closer to the *spina* and out of range of the hurled missiles, he sped on, showering grit all over the crash. Within it, public slaves struggled to cut loose writhing horses entangled in the debris, whose screeches were lost in the tumult of a quarter of a million voices roaring on the ten remaining chariots. Waving the flags of their favoured faction, the citizens of Rome screamed themselves hoarse, stamping their feet on the stepped-stone seating, urging on the teams upon whom over a million sesterces was riding in bets.

The Green driver pulled on the reins wrapped about his waist and slid his team, in a spray of sand, around the turning post closest to the twelve starting boxes positioned next to the towering wood and iron arched gates of the circus; the next lap began. High on a column above the *spina* the fifth of seven bronze dolphins, marking the progress of the race, tilted down and noise of the crowd escalated even more, echoing around the Palatine and Aventine Hills, overlooking the Circus Maximus on either side, and on to the rest of the Seven Hills of Rome.

‘Come on, you Greens! This one has to be ours, lads!’ Marcus Salvius Magnus bawled in excitement to his two companions as the second-placed White chariot misjudged the corner, losing crucial ground and allowing the second Green team to come alongside. Magnus’ breath steamed as the temperature fell with the sun. The baying, sweat-reeking crowd around him, on the Aventine side of the main gates, sported Green colours and had worked themselves up into a frenzied celebration at the prospect of their team’s first win of the day.

‘Twenty-five denarii at eight to one! That’s two hundred, or eight hundred sesterces; Ignatius ain’t going to like that, Magnus,’ the huge bald man next to him shouted, punching the stump of his left wrist in the air.

‘Too right, Marius, we’ve finally got that bastard bookmaker this time, and with our biggest bet of the day.’ Magnus’ scarred, ex-boxer’s face creased into a grin; he looked down at the wooden receipt for the bet, signed by the bookmaker Ignatius, grasped in a massive fist of his other companion. ‘Two hundred denarii – that’s almost as much as a legionary earns in a year! It’ll make Ignatius’ eyes water and swell the brotherhood’s coffers nicely. Fancy a couple of whores tonight, Sextus?’

‘A couple of whores?’ Sextus ruminated, slowly digesting the thought whilst keeping his eyes fixed on the action down on the track far below, where the second Green driver was drawing a small knife from the protective leather strapping around his chest. ‘Right you are, Magnus, if you’re sure we can afford it after what we’ve lost today.’

‘We’ve lost five denarii in nine races, my slow friend, that’s forty-five; we’re one hundred and fifty-five denarii up. We could afford five hundred whores.’

Sextus’ ox-like face creased with strained concentration as he tried – but failed – to get to grips with such advanced arithmetic. ‘With learning like that, brother, I can understand how you got to be the *patronus* of our Crossroads Brotherhood.’

‘If the leader of the Brotherhood can’t count, Sextus, then how is he going to be able to check that everyone in the South Quirinal has paid their rightful dues to us in order to enjoy our continued protection?’

‘Then that rules me out of ever becoming leader.’

‘Yes, that and the fact that you’d have to kill me first.’

The crowd’s thrilled roar drew Magnus’ attention back to the race as the White and Green chariots touched wheels, shattering the eight spokes in both of them in a hail of splintering wood. The Green immediately slashed at the reins tied around his waist with his knife and, severing them, bailed out as the wheels of both vehicles fragmented. At a speed of more than thirty miles per hour, the chariots’ unsupported sides juddered down on to the sand, their naked axles gouging deep furrows, abruptly slowing them and jerking the traces of the two teams of horses, causing them to slew into each other and rebound. With the weight of its driver gone, the Green chariot twisted up into the air, its remaining wheel spinning freely, and arced, with delicious inevitability, over on to the White charioteer. The fast-rotating iron tyre scraped

through the skin of his neck with a spray of blood as it knocked him sideways off the chariot to crunch down, unconscious, on to the track with the reins still wrapped about his waist; his team ran on, dragging him along the scouring sand as his vehicle disintegrated around him.

The leading Green was clear.

‘A selfless act, and the best way to deal with the favourite,’ Magnus pronounced at the top of his voice, watching with approval the downed Green charioteer scabble to his feet and leap on to the spina, narrowly avoiding a trampled death beneath the hooves of three chasing teams. ‘One and a half laps to go and nobody near our man; we’ll collect the money, brothers, and then go and wait outside the senators’ enclosure to escort Senator Pollo home.’

With the result of the race now a foregone conclusion most of the crowd sat back down and amused themselves by watching the attempts of the crashed White *shortator* – the single horsemen attached to each of the twelve racers for exactly this purpose – to pull up the bolting team before their charioteer had all the skin scraped from his limbs. Only the Green faction stayed standing to cheer on the progress of their hero of the moment.

Sure of victory and uninterested in the White charioteer’s fate, Magnus looked around for one of the bookmakers’ slaves who patrolled the crowd with leather bags around their waists, taking bets on behalf of their owners. ‘You, boy!’ he shouted, spotting one of Ignatius’ many slaves circulating amongst the spectators. ‘Over here.’

The elderly slave gave a deferential nod and made his way through the celebrating Green supporters, who had begun pointing and droning crude chants at the White faction on the Palatine side of the gates; they replied with obscene gestures and jeering.

The seventh dolphin fell as the Green chariot, its driver punching the air, crossed the winning line in front of the White faction’s seats; the Greens’ joy was completed by the sight of the White charioteer being carried away, quite evidently dead.

‘Where’s your master, boy?’ Magnus asked as the slave approached.

The old man pointed to the colonnaded walkway above the seating. ‘Up there, sir, next to the statue of Neptune.’

Magnus tugged at the sleeves of Marius’ and Sextus’ tunics. ‘Come on, lads; let’s cash our bet with the man himself so that we can have the pleasure of seeing his face.’

His Crossroads Brethren grinned in anticipation of Ignatius’ expression as he counted out what would, in all likelihood, be his biggest pay-out of the day. The thought of supplementing the considerable income paid to the South Quirinal Crossroads Brotherhood by local traders and residents in return for protection from rival Brotherhoods was a cheering one. They barged past the old slave, who was immediately set upon by other Green supporters who had laid wagers with Ignatius and were now keen to claim their winnings.

The noise of the crowd died down as teams of public slaves poured on to the track to remove mangled chariots and the carcasses of horses and to clear it of thrown objects in preparation for the next race. Magnus and his brothers forced their way to the steps leading up to the walkway and negotiated a path through the tangle of individuals using them as overflow seating. Eventually, after pushing through the crush of people, who, unable to get a seat, were obliged to stand along the colonnade, they managed to get to the walkway that ran along the entire Aventine side of the circus.

‘Now where’s the statue of Neptune?’ Magnus muttered, looking along the carved images of gods and great men that punctuated the colonnade; between them, at regular intervals, were wooden desks at which bookmakers sat counting coinage and clacking abacuses, surrounded by piles of wax tablets, and guarded by thuggish-looking men with cudgels. ‘There it is; I’d know Neptune’s trident anywhere.’

Ignatius’ four guards shifted warily, nervous at being approached by three men just as brutish as themselves; they slapped their cudgels into the palms of their hands, feeling their weight with threatening intent.

Magnus raised his hand in a conciliatory gesture. ‘No need for that sort of behaviour, lads; we’re here to collect our rightful winnings from my old friend Ignatius.’

The man seated behind the desk looked up, midway through tallying a pile of bronze sesterces; his face was as fearsome as those of the men guarding him: lantern jaw, broken nose, dark eyes sunken beneath an overhanging forehead. His attire, however, was not that of a street thug: those days were long behind him, their memory preserved in the livid scars on his left cheek and well-muscled forearms; beneath his white, citizen’s toga he wore a saffron-coloured tunic of finest wool and around his neck, falling to the pectoral muscles on his expansive chest, hung the heaviest and longest gold-linked chain that Magnus had ever seen. ‘Magnus, to what do I owe this dubious pleasure?’ His voice was deep and gruff and his accent betrayed his lowly roots in Rome’s poorest district, the Subura, although he did his best to cover it. ‘I trust that I’ve been having a good afternoon at your expense?’

‘A very good afternoon for the first nine races, Ignatius, you took forty-five in silver off us; a pity about the last race though. Give him the receipt, Sextus.’

Ignatius leaned forward and took the proffered piece of wood bearing his signature along with the number of the bet. ‘Two hundred and eleven.’ Taking up a wax tablet from the top of a pile, he scanned it quickly, raising his pronounced eyebrows and tutted. ‘It seems I owe you money.’

‘It does look that way.’

Ignatius pulled out a heavy-looking strong-box from under the desk. ‘I’d better pay it then, although I don’t understand why you came all the way up here for such a trifling amount when you could have saved yourself the trouble and had one of my slaves pay it out.’

‘Yeah, very funny, Ignatius; that’s going to be your biggest payout today. Now get on with it.’

Ignatius shrugged and unlocked the box; he scooped out a large double handful of silver denarii and began to count them out into stacks of ten. When he had completed four and a half such piles he stopped and pushed them across the desk, toppling them with a metallic clatter.

‘That’s our business completed, I believe.’

‘I may not be able to read, Ignatius, but I can certainly count, and that is nowhere near two hundred denarii plus our original twenty-five stake.’

‘You’re absolutely right, my friend; that’s forty denarii and your original five stake.’

‘We put down twenty-five. Sextus, tell him, you laid the bet.’

Sextus nodded slowly at the memory. ‘Yeah, Magnus, the slave was a young lad with curly black hair; I gave him twenty-five in silver on the Green’s first chariot at eight to one.’

‘Well, my friends, I’ve written down on my ledger: bet two hundred and eleven, Sextus, five denarii, Green first to win, eight to one.’ He picked another tablet up from a different pile and proffered it to Magnus. ‘And this is the slave’s record of all the bets he took on the last race; it says exactly the same thing, but I suppose it’s a waste of time showing it to you gentleman as it probably just looks like a collection of squiggles to you.’

Magnus knocked the tablet away and jabbed his forefinger towards the bookmaker’s face. ‘Listen, Ignatius, I don’t give a fuck about what you wrote down; we made a bet and expect it to be honoured.’

Ignatius remained unruffled; he added another five denarii to the fifth pile. ‘Take the money I owe you plus, as gesture of goodwill, an extra five so that we’re completely even on the day’s transactions as I’ve recorded them; in fact, I’ll even make it easy for you.’ He scooped back the fifty denarii. ‘You can have it in gold.’ He smiled, coldly and without mirth, in a take-it-or-leave-it manner and placed two golden *aurei* on the desk with a couple of hollow clacks. ‘And now piss off before I’m forced to have my lads break open your skulls.’

Magnus tensed, as if he was about to leap over the desk, and felt a heavy hand clamp on to each shoulder.

‘I wouldn’t, mate,’ a voice growled in his ear as the other two guards squared up to Sextus and Marius.

Magnus’ eyes locked with those of Ignatius; he breathed deeply, suppressing the urge to explode into foolhardy action. After a few moments, feeling an icy calm settle on him, he shook himself free from the restraining hands, looked with menace at their owners and then scooped up the two aurei. ‘We’re not even, Ignatius, not by a long way. I now owe you and I pay my debts. Always.’ With a final glare at Ignatius, he pushed past the heavies and walked calmly away.

‘What are you going to do, brother?’ Marius asked, catching Magnus up.
‘Go back down and find that slave.’

‘I swear to you, master,’ the young slave pleaded through gritted teeth, ‘I wrote down twenty-five denarii.’

‘And you gave Ignatius all the money?’ Magnus pulled back the lad’s thumb even further as Sextus, looking puzzled, sat with a massive arm around him as if they were having a friendly chat. Marius stood right in front of the group to block the view of the slave’s pained face, but no one in the crowd was taking any notice; their attention was held by the twelve chariots in the second-to-last race parading around the track.

‘Yes, master. Ignatius blinded the last slave he caught cheating him.’

Magnus increased the pressure. ‘So why do you think that he wrote down five instead of twenty-five?’

‘I don’t know, master, but it’s happened before when he’s stood to lose a lot of money with a big bet.’

‘Has it now? And what about your records?’

The slave’s face screwed up even further. ‘They’re written on wax, master, the two Xs can be scraped clean leaving just the V.’

‘What’s your name, boy?’

‘Menes, master.’

Magnus released his grip. ‘If you know what’s good for you, Menes, you won’t mention our little chat to Ignatius. Now piss off.’

Menes scuttled away and disappeared into the crowd.

Sextus frowned. ‘So did we get the right money or not, Magnus? I mean, can I still have a couple of whores tonight?’

‘No, brother, we did not, but we will; and until we do you’ll just have to make do with one.’

‘Do you think the slave’s lying?’ Marius asked, sitting in Menes’ place.

‘No, brother; I think that Ignatius’ dishonesty means that he has just unwittingly declared war on the South Quirinal Crossroads Brotherhood.’

‘That’s very foolish of him.’

‘Very.’ Magnus stood. ‘Come on, lads, we don’t want to be late for our senator.’

‘Magnus, my friend, I trust you’ve had luck?’ Senator Gaius Vespasius Pollo boomed, waddling down the steps from the senators’ enclosure in a flurry of wobbling belly, jowls and chins.

‘Quite the opposite, senator.’ Magnus took up his position in front of his patron, the man to whom he owed his life, with his brothers at either shoulder, ready to beat a path for him through the departing race-goers disgorging into the urine-scented, cavernous belly of the Circus Maximus.

‘That’s what comes of just betting on your beloved Greens without paying any attention to form.’

‘Once a Green, always a Green, sir.’

Gaius’ full, moist lips broke into a grin as he pushed away a carefully tonged curl of hair from his eye. ‘I find it much better to have no such affiliations; it gives me far more room for manoeuvre and a better chance of backing the winning team. That, of course, goes for politics as well as racing.’

‘I admire your lack of loyalty, sir.’ Magnus shoved a slow-moving, old man out of the way as they emerged through an arch into the Forum Boarium where the four Racing Factions had their race-day camps; horses and wagonloads of chariots trailed out, heading back to their permanent bases on the Campus Martius, north of the city. The fading, late-afternoon light washed the grand marble buildings on the Palatine above them with a warm glow, despite the dropping temperature.

‘I reserve my loyalty for family, patrons and my clients, such as yourself; it’s generally wasted elsewhere.’

‘Except on the Greens.’

Gaius laughed. ‘Have it your own way, Magnus. If it makes you happy to lose your money needlessly, who am I to dissuade you? In the meantime, I have a favour to ask.’

Magnus stopped for a few moments, giving way to a party of higher status. ‘Of course, patronus.’

Gaius nodded at the passing senator, one of this year’s praetors, preceded by his fasces-bearing lictors. ‘As you know, my eldest nephew, Sabinus, has failed for the last two years to get elected as a quaestor; obviously I can’t allow that state of affairs to continue.’

‘Indeed not.’

‘I have to make sure that he gets in this time because next year his younger brother, your friend Vespasian, will be old enough to stand and I certainly won’t be able to afford two sets of bribes; not to mention the friction it’ll cause in their already strained relationship.’

‘Surely your patron, the Lady Antonia, could help; the support of the Emperor Tiberius’ sister-in-law for Sabinus would be invaluable.’

‘I’m nervous about asking her to involve herself in matters, like quaestor elections, so far beneath her.’

‘She involves herself with some matters way beneath her.’

Gaius chuckled. ‘She’s always loved a boxer; is she still demanding your services?’

Magnus grunted. ‘Yeah, well, now and again I get a summons.’

‘I’ve made an appointment to see her tomorrow morning concerning another issue and I wouldn’t want to make two requests of her at the same time; you know how demanding her reciprocal favours can be.’

‘I do – at first hand, as it were.’

‘So I have to look elsewhere for support for Sabinus and that’s where I’ll need your particular skills.’

‘I assume, therefore, that pressure needs to be applied or an incentive offered, if you take my meaning?’

‘I do indeed; but in this case pressure would be risky.’

‘So you have someone in mind?’

‘I think it would help if the Senior Consul publically supported Sabinus.’

‘Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus?’ Magnus turned in horror to Gaius. ‘You must be mad, begging your pardon, to think about influencing him, sir, he’s a monster.’

‘He is.’

‘He pulled an *eques*’ eye out in the forum just because he criticised him.’

‘And only last month he purposely ran over, with his quadriga, a small boy playing on the Via Appia. What better person to support Sabinus? If Ahenobarbus backs him a lot of other people will vote for him too, to keep on the right side of the monster.’

Magnus looked dubious as Marius and Sextus, either side of him, used their strong arms to ease their way through the crush. ‘Why don’t you just bribe him?’

‘I will, and handsomely so; but everyone else is too. He’s taking money from all the candidates and will end up supporting the one who pays him most. The trouble is I don’t know whether my bribe will be enough and I can’t afford to increase it; somehow it needs to be supplemented.’

‘So you want me to ease him in the right direction.’

‘Exactly, but without him realising that I’m behind it as I fully intend to have both my eyes still in place once Sabinus is elected quaestor.’

‘And how do you think I can manage that?’

‘I’ve no wish to know, Magnus my loyal friend; but you’ve served me well before and I’ve complete trust in your ability to solve even the most delicate of problems.’