

DAUGHTERS OF ROME

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in the topic of mystery religions arose during a Latin tutorial I took with Dr. Bernstein in which I researched the subject of cult religions in the Roman Republic. After analyzing literature and criticism related to mystery cults for ten weeks, I realized the limits of traditional scholarship in the field of antiquity. While scholars know a great deal about the superficial nature of the cults that existed during the Republic, the specific details of cult rites, especially those of the Bacchantes, remain ambiguous. The primary draw to mystery cults seemed to me to be the benefit of camaraderie and shared experience that the cults would have provided, as well as the frequent blurring of class and gender divisions within the cults. Consequently, I think that mystery cults played a large role in the development of working class identity and the uprising of slaves and plebs that occurred later in the Empire.

However, I was mostly intrigued during the tutorial by the potential of cult worship to impart agency to the women who participated in these secret rites. Drawing on research from that tutorial, I formulated an idea for a novel that would explore not only what it might have been like to be a participant in an outlawed mystery cult, but also the plausible tensions between the sexes in antiquity. Throughout my novel, I have taken various liberties with the historical timeline, especially in regards to Lucilius and the actions of the cult members, which are largely unknown. However, I have tried to avoid modernization of historical concepts and behaviors. I do not intend to be historically accurate per se, as my primary interest in writing this novel is to explore gender and class tensions, but using Republican Rome as a backdrop to talk

about female experience within a patriarchal society provides a level of impartiality for the reader that I believe cannot be achieved in fiction about the present time.

Daughters of Rome is based around the Roman Senate's decree of 186 B.C.E. in which that body outlawed the *Bacchanalia* (the festival of *Bacchus*) and restricted other meetings of the Bacchic cult. The cult was originally a women's cult, but in later years, it had come to include both men and women of all facets of Roman society. According to the Senate decree¹ and to Livy's account², the Senate purportedly passed the decree because the cult was a foreign (and thus barbaric in the minds of many Romans) group that engaged in secret immoral as well as criminal practices that both corrupted and endangered Rome and individual citizens and slaves. However, there are no extant sources free of political motivation in respect to the practices of the cult. What we have are testaments from members of the Roman patriarchal aristocracy, written centuries after the actual event and banning of the cult, some funerary reliefs, whose veracity is hard to gauge due to the popularity of mixing myth with fact on funerary monuments, and etiological accounts of the origins of the cult, the primary of which is Euripides' *Bacchae*, an obviously fictional account of the wrath of *Bacchus*.

It is doubtful that Livy's account could have been entirely accurate, either; he tells his story of the decree from the perspective of a respected patrician writing about a similarly aristocratic family who purportedly discovers the immoral nature of the cult. I also doubt the Consul's willingness to take the word of a courtesan about affairs of State. The fact that there are no sources pertaining to the cult's activities or rites that

¹ Senatus consultus de bacchanalibus

² Livy 39.

come directly from the lower echelons of Roman society intrigues me. Most of what scholars know about the cult is in relation to the *Bacchanalia*, the large festival held in Rome once a year *ca.* March 16th and 17th. The cult had been accepted as part of the mass of Roman religious festivities until the Senate claimed to have discovered that initiation into the cult was being offered five times a month instead of once a year. However, what actually happened during initiation rites remains largely unknown.

In the later years of the cult, it is clear from inscriptions that the membership was on the rise. This was attributed to the priestess, Paculla Annia, who is said to have been the first to initiate men as well as women, therefore leading the cult into further corruption according to the standards of Roman *mores* and the Senate. I believe that the cult had become a threat to the Roman elite more because of the increase in participants and the mixing of classes than because the cult actually propagated criminal behavior. The cult, a mixing pot of the various social and economic classes, genders, and ages, offered an alternate society to the restrictive one of the Roman elite.

Many people, especially women, were supposed to be subservient to their male relatives—if not always in action, then in position. Women couldn't hold property in their own name without having been divorced or widowed. Moreover, having been divorced, the Roman woman would attain sole responsibility for her dowry, but husbands being in control of the dowry until the time of divorce did not make waiting for a divorce for independence at all a good prospect; sometimes, a husband would squander the dowry before the divorce, which would leave the ex-wife with nothing, to return to her surviving male relatives in ignominy. Widowhood was not much

better, because then the widow, even if she did manage to inherit much of her husband's wealth (in the case that he had no male offspring or was very rich) would be set upon by a flock of social-climbing suitors, who sought marriage as a way of attaining the widow's property. Women, then, were very much under the control of their male relatives, and then their husbands. What I want to show in my novel is the experience of one such woman, who is controlled by the will of the men around her but seeks a way out. In this case, the way out presents itself in the form of the cult. I hope to show how the cult may have functioned as a space within which the marginalized members of the Roman world could enjoy some freedoms and a sense of acceptance and agency that was mostly absent in their day-to-day lives.

Roman historical fiction in general often allows a writer to explore various sensitive issues relating to the modern day through the device of Rome as a stand-in for America. Political intrigue, mysterious deaths, crimes, rebellions, class tension, gender definitions, Rome as an allegory for America, and other such categories function as popular thematic devices in Roman historical fiction. During my research into Roman historical novels, it has become clear that the historical novel facilitates the exploration of human themes, such as mortality, personal and national identity, and morality, by dislocating human nature within time. By talking about individuals who existed so long ago, and painting them with similar dilemmas people still experience today, the subject becomes an archetype of being, able to represent universal struggles because of the subject's remoteness to the reader. I believe that the defamiliarization enabled by historical fiction creates an essential space within which a writer can

explore nature and character on a more universal level than contemporary, familiar settings permit. While I don't believe in the myth of the universal human condition, I do believe that impressions people feel from successes, triumphs, and failures are relatable, and thus by investigating the life of one individual, one can gain insight into at least one aspect of human existence.

In preparation for writing *Daughters of Rome*, I have read a plethora of historical fiction novels set in Rome, all of which illustrate how historical fiction offers an opinion or perspective on the humanity of an historical person, situation, or event. Robert Fast's *Spartacus*, for example, suggests one idea of the kind of person a successful gladiatorial slave who rose against the Romans despite the odds against him might have been. In this effort, Fast renders the history of the Servile Wars from the perspective of the rebellious slaves rather than that of the aristocratic system against which they were rebelling. Similarly, Steven Saylor's novel, *The Judgment of Caesar*, shows the affect of Caesar on one family's personal dynamics. Saylor gives a realistic account of how supporting Caesar could estrange a son from his father because of Caesar's military actions. Alan Gold's novel, *Warrior Queen*, is yet another case of the author rewriting history from the perspective of the oppressed. *Warrior Queen* chronicles the Iceni at the time when they were first coming under Roman oppression through the time in which Boudicca rose against the Romans. All of these novels, though about different historical situations, share the common trait of refiguring history to find the lost voices of those oppressed by the Roman system, those without the power to articulate their situations themselves.

Rewriting events out of the defined historical parameters into alternate perspectives subverts the dominant ideologies present and perpetuated throughout time. In writing *Spartacus*, Fast subverts on the one hand the ideology of slavery, and on the other, in his treatment of Varinia at least, the belief that women are less equal to men; though a slave and a female herself, Fast always presents Varinia as a strong and willful character who strives according to her own agenda and cannot be broken by the oppression of Romans. By treating the story of Spartacus subjectively and from the point of view of the slaves, Fast challenges the historian's dismissal of slavery as a regular aspect of Roman culture, forcing the reader to recognize it as inhumane, no matter how historically distant. *Warrior Queen* functions similarly by subverting the opinion that the conquest of Britannia, and Roman conquest in general, was right and noble by showing the real effects of Roman occupation on the native inhabitants. The work also subverts the commonly held opinion that women are less tactically adept at managing warfare, as the entire uprising is led by queen Boudica after she and her daughters are savagely raped by the occupying Roman soldiers. *The Judgment of Caesar* is subversive as well in that it questions Caesar's reputation as one of the greatest Romans of all time. Saylor's novel causes the reader to think more critically about the renown Roman military affairs still have today by showing the effects of constant conquest on a family who is torn apart over military matters.

However, even in the novels that feature strong female characters, I find that their roles within the works are minimal, shadowed by the male protagonists. For example, in Ruth Downie's novels about the Roman *medicus*, Ruso, she creates a

strong female character in Tilla, a barbarian from Britain whom Ruso saves during his time in the province. However, despite Tilla's importance to Downie's plots and her frequent exercise of agency, she remains a secondary character and subordinate to Ruso. Although some of Tilla's subordination may be a result of Downie's attempt to be historically accurate to the situation of women in the Roman Empire, her characterization of Tilla as a cute and precocious woman, unthreatening because of her female status, renders Tilla's character just another example of the patriarchal discourse of the elite sectors of society. It's okay to be amused by a female, a barbarian, but it isn't okay to legitimate a woman like Tilla because of societal precepts. Instead, Ruso is the sympathetic character with whom the audience is expected to identify.

In *Daughters of Rome*, I have tried to reclaim the female voice that is so conspicuously absent from Roman literature. The plot, driven by Lucilia's experiences and revelations, hinges upon her developing strength as an individual, despite the oppressive forces that threaten to overwhelm her, forcing her to conform to the Roman ideal of a woman—little more than a possession, and dangerous when given a modicum of power. Lucilia, the daughter of Lucilius, a Roman *patrician* whose aristocratic ambitions have been foiled by his father's superfluous expenses and gambling, comes into conflict with her father when Lucilius' depleted funds cause him to force on his daughter marriage to a promising and politically important Senator as a means of gaining political support.

In an attempt to reclaim women's voices otherwise left out of the historical record, I have striven to show one possible situation on a personal level resulting from the Senate's decree outlawing the *Bacchanalia*. Instead of giving a flat account of historical events relating to the Senate's decree, I have tried to explore characters and personal experience. My narrative is character-driven, and develops around Lucilia's increasing personal strength in reaction to the decree and the troubles caused by the decree. Lucilia, one of the Bacchantes, is forced to decide between her religious duty and her familial loyalty. *Daughters of Rome* chronicles her reactions to the decree and the interactions between her and her fellow Bacchantes.

My novel takes place during three days immediately following the Senate's decision to persecute the Bacchic cult. *Daughters of Rome* proposes a potential, albeit fictional, scenario for the cult's function, both as an independent, religious organization and as an activist core operating to counteract through subversive measures the negative effects of Roman civilization upon the lower classes, and in some cases, the aristocrats themselves. By portraying the cult as a humanist organization operating to help the impoverished masses who would otherwise have no recourse to medical or financial benefits, I offer one plausible explanation for the cult's widespread popularity in the Ancient world.

Economic tension also plays a key role in *Daughters of Rome* as Decia's frequent presence in company with Lucilia often aggravates Lucilius because of Decia's lower economic status. Lucilia's long-time friend, Decia, features prominently in the story as a fellow member of the cult and childhood friend. Their interactions are

of paramount importance to any reclamation of female voices, as interactions between women are vastly different from those that take place between women and men, or even in the presence of men. As initiates, they are both privy to the *logoi*, the sacred knowledge an initiate gains upon being initiated into any mystery cult. There is some class tension between Lucilia and Decia, as Decia's father is merely a tradesman with no chance of ever becoming a politician.

The story begins with Lucilia receiving word that her suitor, Ulpus, has asked her father for permission to marry her. In a Roman context, Lucilia's assent is not essential to the match. The patriarch of a Roman family has *patriae potestas*, the power over life and death of offspring, especially daughters. Lucilia is not eager to marry Ulpus because it may compromise her ability to participate in the cult and because there is no love between them. She has come to believe that there is no benefit in a marriage devoid of a deep emotional bond, such as that between herself and Decia. However, Lucilia's father expects her to marry Ulpus to strengthen his claim to a Senatorial seat in the coming election.

When the two women learn of the Senate's persecution of Bacchantes throughout the city, they must decide whether to continue practicing their religious rites or abandon them in fear of discovery. The punishment for participation in the cult is death, but to forsake their sacred vows may very well result in *piaculum*, a specific religious negligence that results in bad omens and possible punishment by the offended deity. The increased attention paid to the cult and its activities also causes a

strain on the women's relationship, as to be found out, for Lucilia, would result in the ire of her father.

The interactions between slaves and citizens in the cult are also essential to the narrative as they were restricted in society at large. Lucilia's relationship with Habilis, a slave in Lucilia's father's household, is important because although his status as a slave separates him from Lucilia in a profound way, his participation in the cult enables a close relationship between them that might otherwise be impossible to maintain in her father's household. According to the historical record³, slaves were initiated into the cult alongside citizens and patricians. Their numbers or functions within the cult are largely unknown; however, it is clear that they had a reason for joining the Bacchic cult. I believe that they were probably enticed by the Bacchantes' rites because they afforded them something similar to equal status and agency. Although oppressed in other facets of society, the cult may have been a sort of liberating experience for the slaves of Rome, as well as for the women, who chose to be initiated into the Bacchic mysteries.

Though we cannot know for sure what practices the Bacchantes actually engaged in, one may draw on the practices of other better-known cults for a general idea of some of the activities the cult may have sponsored. We know from the slander and etiological myths of *Bacchus* that the cult had something to do with consumption of wine, as *Bacchus* is the god of the vine, and thus vintage. It is also commonly held that a major aspect of cult practice was dancing, as evidenced by accounts of the *Bacchanalia* and the etiological myths associated with the cult's origins, fictionalized

³ See Contextual Notes.

by Euripides in his play, *The Bacchae*. From the Senate's decree and Euripides' play, the cult also seems to have been associated with orgiastic behavior and other illicit class-transcending sexual encounters. From funerary reliefs, one may deduce that the cult and *Bacchus* was also associated with death and the afterlife.

In my novel, I take some artistic liberties with the cult, portraying it as a humanitarian society that addresses both the physical and spiritual needs of its members. The Bacchic cult of my novel provides medical treatment, food, and clothing for those who are in need. Women in the cult enjoy an agency forbidden to them within the larger context of Roman society. Moreover, when Ulpius acts to finalize his engagement to Lucilia, she is able to go to the head priestess of the cult, Paculla, to ask for relief. Paculla promises to help Lucilia out of her current situation. However, the urgency of the Senate's hunt for the Bacchantes takes precedence over Lucilia's personal crisis. She is forced to react to the Senate's increased presence as its investigation into the cult progresses. Although the Senate claims that the Bacchantes who turn themselves in will receive trials, it is common knowledge among the characters in my novel that the Senate's investigation will likely lead to the execution of many of the cult's members. This was the factual case in the historical record; there is no known definitive number of people executed for association with the cult, but the number can be confidently estimated in as many as the thousands, perhaps even the tens of thousands.

The tension between and among women within a patriarchal society is another theme I explore in my novel. Lucilia and her mother have a tense relationship, largely

due to the presence of Lucilius and their interactions with him. Throughout the work, the relationship between Lucilia and her mother, Valeria, is strained because of Valeria's ostensible willingness to be subservient to her husband. Lucilia resents her mother for what she perceives as weakness. Decia, more sympathetic to the plight of women within the patriarchal society, believes that Lucilia shouldn't hold her mother accountable for her compliance. However, Lucilia refuses at first to mend her relationship with her mother, fearing that her mother would turn on them at the behest of her husband. On the night of the revel, though, Lucilia thinks she sees her mother along with her father's slave, Lucilia's close friend, Habilis. This will lead to Lucilia's reevaluation of her mother's strength and character, repairing the damaged bond between mother and daughter because of Valeria's participation in the liberty-bestowing cult.

In *Daughters of Rome*, I have tried to give insight into the emotions and feelings of those marginalized by the Roman power structure. The ancient sources remaining to us do a good job of showing events, thoughts, and feelings from the perspective of the aristocracy, at least that of the male members of the aristocracy, but for that reason, they are unreliable sources as to the reality of daily life for people under the yoke of Roman oppression. I believe it is important to attempt to discover what life would have been like for those not given voices either in society or in literature. I am particularly interested in the benefits, both tangible and intangible, that women may have gained through participation in the cult. I have tried to convey the havoc wreaked by grasping for power, and at the same time show how women are

affected by their marginalization within any patriarchy. I intend this thesis to be a sort of feminist reclamation of history within the framework of historical fiction.

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*“It is bad to live under constraint, but nothing can
constrain a man to live under constraint.” (Epictetus)*

1

Day 1: 186 B.C.E.

Lucilia arrived at her friend's house early one cold morning in the month of Mars. The sun had just cleared the horizon in a soft golden haze. The thin layer of frost on the gray paving stones beneath her feet was a reminder of the recent cold, though. Lucilia looked up and down the deserted street. The baker's shop next door to Decia's house had yet to open. The old man who managed it probably hadn't even gotten out of bed yet. The slightly cracked window shutter was probably just an oversight of the day before. She knocked softly on the heavy wooden door of Decia's house. She'd knocked on this door hundreds, if not thousands, of times before. But the anticipation of waiting for Decia to answer still made her palms sweat and her heart palpitate, until finally, Decia would answer, and her breath would catch in her chest, nearly choking her as she tried to speak. This time, though, Decia was already waiting for her when she knocked. Decia stepped aside to allow Lucilia into the vestibule of her home. She closed the door firmly behind Lucilia and bolted the lock.

"I had to come see you right away," Lucilia said, rushing to speak what was on her mind before Decia had a chance to greet her, to distract her from what she'd come to say. She grasped her friend's hand, looking her intently in the eye. "We received word not an hour ago." She shivered and wrapped her cloak more tightly around her body with her free arm. Even in the cold, she was struck by how shiny and soft Decia's auburn hair looked, how correctly plaited and neat—unlike her own hair,

which hung dull and limp, and stuck out at strange angles despite her best efforts to smooth it into place.

Decia didn't respond to Lucilia's statement. Instead, she snatched her hand away and ushered Lucilia through the house. She would want to go to a more secluded area where they weren't as likely to be interrupted before discussing the news; Decia had always been more careful, more on her guard when discussing delicate matters. At least Lucilia hoped she would at least talk about it with her—Decia was bound to be upset by the sudden turn of events.

"Well what about the baker? Why wasn't his window shut? It frosted last night. All that cold air can't be good for a man of fifty."

Decia gave her an exasperated look. "You're always worried about other people. If you must know, his daughter snuck out of the house several times last year and claimed she couldn't get back in because he'd locked her out."

"His solution to that is to leave the window cracked at night? Huh. I wish my father would be so lenient. Still, a robber could get in or anything." Lucilia didn't think anything was worth leaving one's window, especially one's street side window, open at night in Rome.

"There you go again. It's not your business anyway. Let people do what they want. I'm sure he realizes the consequences. If you concerned yourself half so much with your own affairs we wouldn't be in this situation!"

Lucilia tried several more times to make idle conversation with Decia as they walked, but Decia snapped at her each time: No, she hadn't done anything unusual to

her hair—what an outrageous suggestion; of course, her father had gotten a few new clients—didn't he always; no, Decia wouldn't like to go see a gladiatorial match—how could Lucilia even suggest such a dreadful thing. As she was shooting down all of Lucilia's attempts to be friendly, Decia barely even looked at her. Lucilia had expected her friend to react angrily to the news of Lucilia's engagement, but then, Decia always was one to keep a level head. This silent treatment was hardly unfamiliar to Lucilia in their long relationship. Decia called it having her space, but Lucilia had never really understood how that turned into not wanting to talk about things that displeased her. When Decia finally did speak, it was not idle chatter.

“Everything will change if you marry him, you know,” Decia said, waving a greeting to a slave, who was watering a plant nearby as they passed him.

Lucilia suddenly had the sensation that they only ever had this one conversation. It was as if they had nothing else to talk about anymore. It was no surprise to either of them that Ulpius had finally sought permission from Lucilia's father to bring their engagement to its conclusion. Maybe Lucilia had been surprised to overhear Ulpius' messenger that morning, to hear her parents discussing her prospects, to realize that she would be marrying Ulpius much sooner than she had expected, but she had known it would happen eventually. She should have put up more of a resistance to the match—not that it would have mattered. Her father was determined to have his way. She might have argued anyway, though, but she had thought that she had more time. When her father had first told her about Ulpius and his request, she had reacted rashly, refusing to marry him or anyone else. That had been a

year ago, and still Ulpus was adamant; her father, too, was steadfast in his support of the match. Her rejection of the proposal had meant nothing. Ultimately, she would have to do what her father wished her to do. That was just the way things were. Ulpus was a decent man, and more than that, he had promised to help her father repay some of the family debts. But she was not happy about how the news had affected her best friend. Or how it would affect their relationship.

Decia held her arms taut by her side and had yet to smile at Lucilia. Her posture, too, was atypical for her; there was a tension in her shoulders that Lucilia knew betrayed more than mere upbringing, as Decia's parents were of the working class and hadn't bothered to train Decia as a lady. Her father had insisted that being able to work as a cook, maid, or any other feasible occupation was more important than her carriage.

"This is ridiculous," Decia said.

"You're the one being ridiculous," said Lucilia. "You knew this would happen eventually. Yet here you are, acting as if I could do anything about it when you know very well that I can't delay him any longer. I don't know how I've managed to keep him off thus far. He is determined. My father supports Ulpus' efforts wholeheartedly, and it's not as if I can expect my mother to intervene for me."

"And why not?" asked Decia. The hostility in her voice didn't surprise Lucilia.

"Because," said Lucilia, "it's fine and all for your mother to stand up for you, but it's different here. As much as I love her, my mother is thoroughly under my

father's hand. I know it's ridiculous, but they say it should be so in the household.

Tradition and whatnot. Everything according to the customs of the ancestors*.”

Decia was silent as they passed several more slaves, who were busily scrubbing the floor or bustling in and out of chambers with armloads of linens to be washed.

The two women had not yet reached the back of the house. In all the years that they had been friends, Lucilia never ceased to marvel at the fact that Decia's father had procured such a large and compete household on his precarious income, and with three children, no less! Traders did well enough in the colonies, but in Rome proper, Lucilia had a hard time understanding how he ever gained new buyers for his wares. One could only use so many carpets or perfumes; these were items that didn't need to be replaced often. Then there's the establishment of his sons, a deed that seemed almost miraculous in light of his profession. They were both very well-off army men now, with substantial savings from their father. And still, this house. Years ago, Decia's father had acquired the sumptuous, furnished *domus**, complete with a regiment of slaves and its own kitchen. And in the *urbs** proper, too. If nothing else, it was a sign of his ingenuity, an ingenuity that Lucilia often associated with Decia.

Finally, when it was apparent that Decia wasn't going to reply, Lucilia spoke again, “Decia, I don't mean to hurt you. You know that. I wish there were something I could do. It's not as if I want to be married.” Lucilia looked pleadingly at Decia, hoping her friend would be sympathetic, needing her friend to be sympathetic.

“Shush,” said Decia. “You shouldn’t speak so plainly.” She glanced around warily, nodding pointedly at a slave who was dusting a potted plant on the other side of the hallway. “I was just hoping that this wouldn’t come about for quite some time. I’ve heard of engagements lasting for years. I was just hoping . . .” Decia stared down at the floor. “I don’t mean to blame you for this.”

“Well, that was my hope, too. But I am getting beyond marriageable age; I’ll be twenty next year. I’m so sorry, Decia. I wish there were something we could do. I mean, I wish there were something I could do. I feel so helpless.” Lucilia gave Decia’s arm a light squeeze.

Lucilia was relieved by the time they reached the *exedra** behind the garden room at the back of the house: here, at least, there would be no eavesdroppers or curious ears. Even had the house slaves not been so busy this early in the day, it was a well-known fact that Decia’s mother spent her days in the reception room, just off the main hallway, weaving elaborate designs onto rugs. She would be waking anytime now. Lucilia wasn’t sure how she felt about the marriage, but she didn’t want to defend her own disdain for the match against a woman who was ostensibly in a happy marriage herself.

Decia’s father would be out most of the day trying to secure business from members of the upper echelons of Roman society. He had a few clients who bought his merchandise regularly, but he knew more customers would improve his situation. In an effort to increase his business, Decius would travel through many districts of the city, even the Subura, in order to obtain new contacts. He traded in everything from

olive oil and house wares to exotic pets; many Romans were willing to pay exorbitant rates for foreign animals or artwork. Lucilia figured that it must be a matter of having the right approach.

Decia's family was not a prosperous one, but they had done well for themselves. Although Decia's father always viewed it as something of a shame that his wife had to work to help support their lifestyle, Lucilia knew that Decia herself took a significant amount of pride in her mother's sense of responsibility and capability. Many Roman women would have utterly refused to do any work for monetary gain, viewing it as beneath them to toil when they had husbands for that. Lucilia couldn't empathize, but she thought it was a warm feeling and must come out of a closeness between mother and daughter, one that Lucilia didn't share with her own mother who always seemed so ready to do exactly as her father wished and so unwilling to take any initiative. Even in interactions with the servants, Lucilia's mother was generally thought to be very non-confrontational and hesitant to point out misbehavior or inadequacies. She was soft.

"Do you think that at least you will be able to convince Ulpius to let you attend the rites?" Decia asked, bringing them to a halt in the middle of one of the small rooms. "I can't stand the thought of him watching your every move."

Lucilia crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't know," she said. "I don't think it's very likely. He's very traditional. He probably wouldn't be comfortable letting his wife out of the house after dark, let alone in the middle of the night."

“Don’t make excuses for him,” Decia snapped. “You hardly even know him. I’ve been your friend for years and you know me—why would you take his side over mine? Since when do you care about tradition? Since when is it an excuse to not stand up for yourself and what you want?”

“It’s not that I’m trying to defend him, Dee,” Lucilia said. “I just don’t know what you expect me to say when I don’t know myself how he’ll react. I’m not sure I will be able to convince him of my religious duty at all, let alone the fact that it necessitates my being out of the house in the middle of the night. I mustn’t seem to value it above my marital duty or he’ll surely be incensed and forbid me from associating with our fellow worshipers.”

“It’s sacrilege if he doesn’t permit you to attend. You know it’s true,” Decia said quietly, casting a glance at the entryway through which they had just walked. “It’s sacrilege if you forsake your vows.”

“Don’t you think I know that? But if he doesn’t worship—and we have no reason to think that he does—then I don’t think that he will put much faith in my devotion. You know the things they’re saying about us. I heard that the rumors have even penetrated into the Forum. He has certainly heard at least a snatch of what is going around about our rites. If he doesn’t refuse me outright, he will spy on me and report back to the Senate.”

Decia rolled her eyes. “And I suppose now you’re starting to think that what we do is immoral, too?” she asked.

“No,” said Lucilia, “definitely not. But you have to look at it from his point of view—from an outsider’s point of view. Most people, especially most patricians, view women who indulge in excessive consumption of wine, dancing, and nighttime gatherings as adulterous and wicked. How are they supposed to think of these same behaviors now that men take part in them alongside the women?”

“I don’t think they should ever criticize what women do in their free time. It’s not as if we forsake our duties,” Decia protested. “We just aren’t entrusted with very much. What do they expect us to do? Sit around staring at the frescoes on the walls?”

“Right, and you don’t think it’s forsaking our duties to refuse to bear children or to carry on extramarital affairs behind our fathers’ and husbands’ backs?”

“You take your father too seriously,” said Decia. “You should worry more about what makes you happy. It’s not like we’re going to live forever.”

Decia wandered over to the far wall, apparently inspecting the leaves and flowers painted to resemble horticultural landscapes. Finally, she looked back at Lucilia. Her eyes were shining and brilliant, despite the deep flush that had come over her pale features. “Don’t be angry at me. It’s just that I will miss you if you marry him.”

“Let’s not speak of such things until they pass. You know I love you,” said Lucilia, crossing the room and gently kissing her friend on the cheek. Seeing Decia unsettled was worse than being unsettled herself. “Let’s not argue again. We should find some useful project to take our minds off this horrible mess. There’s still a chance that things may come out for the best.”

Decia nodded, staring listlessly across the room. “Remember when that awful Crispus wanted to marry me?” she asked.

“Of course,” Lucilia said. “I met him once at some party your father gave. He was the one with that strange manner of speech.”

“It was a lisp. Don’t be so polite. He had a lisp, and yet they expected me to marry him.” She looked at Lucilia, who didn’t react. “And do you now see a ring on my finger? Do you now hear me making excuses for my activities based on my husband’s refusal to give his permission? Do you witness my failure to show appropriate *religio** because of my husband’s attested lack of faith?” Decia’s eyes were flat and hard, betraying nothing.

Her words did not shake Lucilia, though. “Well, of course not. You didn’t marry him, you silly girl,” Lucilia said lightly.

“I know I didn’t marry him. What did you think had happened? That he had made a better match? Unlikely with his financial situation, not to mention that dreadful lisp; it made him ridiculous. No, instead I had to beg and wheedle my father until he granted me some mercy. It was arduous, and I resent it even now, but in the end he did not force me to marry Crispus.”

Lucilia knew that Decia expected her to agree to take this plan of action and apply it to her own situation. Decia would not have told her otherwise; it was disgraceful to beg, even for a noble cause.

“It’s different, though,” Lucilia said, frowning at her friend. “You know that it’s different.”

Decia grimaced. “Why? Because your father has more money than mine?”

“Not at all. Your father is a good man, Decia. But mine is up for quaestor* next year, a minor magistracy, I know, but that’s the best, straightest path to a political career. Think about it. How would it look if his daughter defied him now? Even if I managed to do it demurely enough and to convince him that it really was in my best interest to refuse a marriage right now, that would make it seem as though I had him wrapped around my finger. It’s been years since someone from our family has had enough money to become a Senator. But he wouldn’t stand a chance if the Senate found out that his daughter pulls his strings when it suits her. They’d say that it’s too dangerous to let men who aren’t masters of themselves have political power.”

“I see,” Decia said. “Well, I didn’t know that, but I still don’t see how it changes things for you at all. Fortuna favor your father in the election, but I won’t if he makes you marry that man. I thought he didn’t have enough backing to even have a shot at something like that, though.”

“Well, he wouldn’t have under normal circumstances, what with the familial inclination towards gambling. I think he’s expecting Ulpius to fund him, though.”

“Right. Selling ourselves now, are we? I would have thought you knew better by now.”

“It’s not like that, Decia. Not exactly, anyway. It’s just this situation. I don’t know how to get out of it, or if I even can. But whatever I do, I don’t want to hurt my father. He’s all that’s saving me from the streets. I have to be diplomatic, if I do

anything about this at all. Otherwise, the cause will be entirely lost and I could end up hurting my father's petition."

"And what about me?" Decia asked. "Do you even care what happens to me?"

"I don't know what to say to that, Decia," Lucilia said. "You know my first allegiance is to my father . . . it has to be."

"Yes, because he deserves your faithfulness and obedience," said Decia, glaring at her friend with an unnatural hostility.

"Well, he may not be the nicest man, nor the best father, but at least he's raised me. It's not as if he left me in the city square when I was born. He never renounced me. He's always clothed and sheltered me. He even saw to it that I could read and write, which is a lot more than you can say for many women in families such as mine."

"You want to say that? He educated you? I think you're forgetting what really happened," Decia said.

"No, I'm not, but if it hadn't been for his good grace, he would never have consented to my mother's pleading and Habilis' logical arguments. If at times I've wished for more of an opportunity to study oratory or law, well, there are books for that. He's never restricted my reading material."

"Besides banning you from reading Ovid," Decia muttered.

"Oh, he did not," said Lucilia, "He merely suggested that there were other things that would be more beneficial for me to read than romantic poetry and crude lyrics. I won't jeopardize his chances of improving his situation because I have whims

that don't agree with his idea of what my ambitions should be. I can't help it if I don't want to be stuck being wife to some boring old politician, but I'm not going to argue with him if my doing so will hurt him financially."

"But don't you see, it wouldn't be hurting him," said Decia. "It just wouldn't be helping him to regain what his own blood relatives squandered."

"My blood relatives," Lucilia corrected.

"If you say so," said Decia.

"You know you're more than a sister to me," said Lucilia. "I would do anything for you, but please don't ask me to go against my father's wishes."

Decia frowned.

"Besides, who knows, marriage might not change our relationship as much as you think," Lucilia said.

"Right."

After a few minutes, Decia visibly collected herself, and gave Lucilia a smile, albeit it a rather thin one. "Let's have our breakfast in the garden," she said. "Maybe later we can go to the market to find some thread for the loom. I've had this image in my head of the Rape of Lucretia*; it would make a fine hanging. It's very popular, you know. People would pay well to have a depiction of the tale."

"All right," Lucilia said. "I hope you won't be angry with me anymore."

Decia was silent as they walked into the garden to while away the time until the markets would be open. Lucilia wished her friend would be her usual, optimistic self and chatter idly as they had always done in the past, about important things and

inconsequential ones alike. She wished Decia would tell her about minutiae and the goings-on of so-and-such a slave, anything to take her mind off the situation at hand. She couldn't stop thinking about what would happen if she did end up marrying Ulpus. What if they ever had children? It was inconceivable to think that soon she might be burdened with children. Ulpus was not particularly wealthy, but she hoped he could at least be counted on to provide her with a polite wet-nurse. The fortune of politicians was never guaranteed, though. Ulpus might be a rising orator now, but Lucilia knew that his station was liable to be taken from him or challenged any number of times in the future. He could end up destitute, and she didn't think her father would be offering that generous a dowry for her. She had to be prepared for all eventualities. But more than anything, she resented the fact that she had to worry about any of this now, when she should be enjoying her time with the person she cared for most in the world.

The market was crowded when they arrived. From Decia's house, it had only taken ten minutes to walk there. Decia had suggested that the selection might be better at one of the numerous foreign businesses located in the Subura just outside the center of Rome, but Lucilia hadn't wanted to go so far just to have a wider selection of shades of thread; it was all the same stuff anyway. Personally, she didn't care about the difference between plum and grape, but Decia was more discerning and insisted that the subtle differences in shades mattered. In the end, Lucilia had overruled her—it was her money anyway—and they had just gone to the small market in the Forum.

“What will it be, ladies?” asked an old man standing next to a cart piled high with skeins of thread in various colors and fibers.

“Do you remember which colors we’re out of?” asked Lucilia, who hadn’t used a loom herself in more than a month.

Decia shook her head. “I’m out of pink and blue, but I don’t know about your stash.”

“Well me either,” said Lucilia. “We should have asked my mother before we left.”

“Yeah, and disturb her rest,” said Decia.

“Might I suggest this assorted pack of thread?” said the old man, rummaging through the pile of skeins. “One time deal. I’ll give you all ten of them for eight *asses*.” He held out ten different skeins, tied together through the center by what looked like a piece of fishing twine.

“If that’s even what it is she’s doing in her room,” said Lucilia, taking hold of one of the skeins to test the durability of the thread. “What do you think?” she asked Decia, indicating the skein she was holding.

“Looks fine to me,” Decia said, shrugging. “I heard her tell your father she’s tired.”

“She probably just didn’t want him to bother her,” said Lucilia. She reached into a fold of her *stola** and pulled forth a small, elaborately beaded red and purple pouch. “Seven,” she said to the old man.

He shook his wrinkled head, scratching his bald pate with his empty hand.

“This is very fine quality thread,” he insisted. “My mother spins it herself.”

Decia coughed. “If his mother’s still alive, I’m Venus herself,” she said under her breath.

“Okay, six then,” said Lucilia, staring at the old man. “I don’t even know if I need all these colors.”

The old man sighed audibly, shaking his head again. “All right, Miss,” he said. “But only for you and your friend. Special onetime deal.”

Lucilia pulled out the six copper pennies from the purse and handed them to the old man, taking the bunch of thread from him as the money changed hands.

The two women smiled simultaneously at the old man, bidding him farewell.

“Good doing business with you, ladies,” he said as they walked back in the direction of Lucilia’s house.

“Do you think he really means that?” asked Lucilia.

“Undoubtedly. That thread was worth half what you paid for it.”

“But he wanted a lot more money than I gave him,” protested Lucilia.

“Don’t be naïve. Of course he did. That’s how he makes a living. Mark-up in retail is where all the profit’s at. Believe me, I know.”

Lucilia did believe her. After all, she should know. Her father sold and bought enough for her to have picked up many tricks of the trade by proxy.

Lucilia's house was quiet that afternoon. As she had suspected, her father was nowhere to be seen when she and Decia returned from the market. They hurried through the entrance and into the atrium, making sure to stay near the walls and far away from the open hole in the middle of the ceiling. It had started raining only moments before. They had barely managed to save the wool from being ruined by the sudden downpour. Her mother was presumably somewhere in the back of the house, reluctant to venture out of her quarters and into the company of Lucilius' many mistresses. Lucilia knew it was commonplace for citizens to have extramarital affairs, but to flaunt them so openly in front of one's spouse, under one's own roof, went against every code of decorum she had ever heard of. Lucilia pitied her mother for that, at least.

The two women took their purchases and set up the strands of thread on the loom in Lucilia's room. To save them some inconvenience, they had purchased already spun thread. Lucilia could afford the extra expense. Although she and her mother generally wove less frequently than Decia and her mother, Lucilia's loom was by far a grander specimen. She watched with pride as Decia fondly patted the frame, gliding her hand along the smooth, polished surface. The frame itself was made of finely sanded rosewood and had a beautiful purple tint to the grain, while the shuttles were closer to the color of mahogany. As a young child, Lucilia had begged her father for the loom one day in a market outside of the Forum. It was to replace the old and decrepit loom her mother had inherited from her great grandmother. Lucilius hadn't been willing to assent at first, claiming there was no money for such frivolity—but

then Lucilia's mother had reprimanded him, castigating him for carousing and drinking their savings away. 'You're just like your father,' she had said. Lucilia hadn't understood it at the time, but as she aged and became more familiar with the state of the family finances, she realized that her mother had been alluding to her grandfather Sextus' penchant for expensive things he couldn't reasonably afford—even at the price of comfort and station. Lucilius had been shamed into purchasing the loom, and ever since then, Lucilia had cherished the piece. It was a sort of token of the only time her mother had ever taken her side against her father, and Lucilia was proud of it.

Decia was weaving the left side. Lucilia worked on the right. The loom was usually relegated to Lucilia's *cubiculum**, but she had gotten several of the stronger male slaves to move the loom into her father's *tablinum** so that the two would have more room to work. Being late afternoon, she knew the room would most likely remain vacant for the remainder of the day. She liked this room better than most of the others in the *domus* because of the colorful frescoes decorating the walls. They depicted scenes of fauns traipsing through the wilderness, youths gathering berries, and satyrs drinking from horned cups. In the Greek tradition, several scenes of nymphs in sheer gowns fleeing from satyrs also featured prominently on the walls. Lucilia enjoyed the beautiful women, but the irony of such beautiful images coexisting with the lusty expressions of the satyrs never lessened. In other places in the house, frescoes were less frequent and generally depicted more austere scenes of *labor** or *pietas**. She had always found it strange that Lucilius would choose his official

business room for these rustic scenes, but then maybe they were a relic of his own father, or of her mother's former influence over household affairs.

For the tapestry itself, the women had decided to focus on the part of the story in which Lucretia exhorts her husband and father to seek revenge on Sextus Tarquinius for the injustice he had done to her. Lucilia had always found this particular story unpleasant; something about it made her uncomfortable, though she was never quite able to say why she reacted this way to a story purportedly about women's strength and virtue. All through the morning, she had tried to get Decia to tell her why she wanted to weave this particular story. It was more than money, Lucilia knew; if Decia just wanted to make a good profit, they could have depicted more easily Perseus' trials* or some of the daring Greek stories that had become so wildly popular of late. Decia had been obstinate. Lucilia was to weave the figures of Colatinus and Spurius Lucretius while Decia, being better skilled at showing fine detail in expressions, would weave Lucretia herself.

It was as they were engaged in the tedious labor of fashioning the detail of the characters' hair that Sextus Lucilius Figulus walked into the room. He didn't look particularly angry to Lucilia, but she doubted very seriously if he was there to ask her how her day was going.

"Well, now I see where you've taken yourself off to all day," said Lucilia's father. "Tell me, were you planning to ever say anything to Ulpius? He's been waiting all afternoon. He's very patient with you. You should appreciate that."

All this time, Lucilius never once looked in the direction of Decia. He was staring blankly at the loom, a furrow appearing across his brow.

“And what is that doing in here? I think I’m more than patient with your impulsive behavior myself, but you’ve been acting very childish of late. You know I receive visitors in here. What would they think if they saw that I had given over my work space to my daughter’s fancy?”

“Perhaps they would think that your daughter is an upright and chaste example of a Roman woman?” Decia suggested, not looking up from the loom as she spoke.

Lucilia shot a bewildered glance at Decia, trying to warn her friend into silence with her eyes. However, Decia had chosen this particular moment to behave very much like a Stoic. Her face was a mask of demure, polite congeniality. She never looked up from the loom. The smile on her face suggested that she was enjoying herself immensely.

“Don’t mind her,” said Lucilia. “We had a bit of an argument earlier and she’s still miffed about it. I just thought it might be nice to work on such a somber depiction in a room filled with happy paintings.” Lucilia, too, avoided her father’s eyes.

“And what exactly is it you’re weaving?” There was a glint in his eyes, but he ignored Decia’s comment entirely.

Lucilia thought of several weeks ago when her father had seen her working on a depiction of Bacchus with his followers, dancing a merry jig and drinking wine from leaves fashioned into the shapes of cups. He had asked her then if she thought that it

was an appropriate subject for a young woman's work. She had said that she didn't see why not. This time, without a doubt, the work fell under that category—appropriate.

"We were working on a depiction of the Rape of Lucretia," she said, hesitantly at first but gaining more assurance when Lucilius didn't evince a negative reaction.

"We want to show her telling Colatinus and her father about Tarquinius' betrayal. It's rather difficult, since we have to rely solely upon small gestures and facial expressions to convey the appropriate emotion of the scene."

"I see," said Lucilius. "But I don't see why you young people want to spend all your time dwelling on such solemn tales. Maybe there's a moral in them for you to learn, though. Well, I just came in to tell you that Ulpus will be staying for supper with us tonight. You are to be polite, even amiable, to him. If I wasn't clear before, let me be so now. You are going to marry him; it's a good match for you. He will be able to provide for you. The sooner you accept this, the easier it will be."

Without waiting for a response, Lucilius walked toward the doorway, calling over his shoulder, "How'd you get that damned thing in here anyway?"

Once his footsteps no longer resounded in the corridor, Decia cast a long look at Lucilia.

"At least he didn't mention the rumors," Decia said. "That's some good news."

"I guess," said Lucilia. "But not if I'm married to a man who won't let me out of his sight longer than it takes to use the facilities."

Lucilia sighed unhappily then, returning to passing the shuttle through the strands on the loom. She had already messed up twice, for which there were now two

very prominent spots of the wrong shade in Colatinus's hair. She would have to be more attentive to the work at hand. Decia's weaving was perfect, as usual. She had given Lucretia gleaming black tresses piled on her head in a disarray of curls and knots. Lucilia rested the shuttle in her lap and looked down at her hands. It was hopeless.

"Will you stay for supper?" Lucilia asked.

"I don't know. Your father didn't seem to be in a very good mood." Decia didn't look up from her weaving. If anything, she seemed to move her head closer to the yarn.

"Oh, bother him. I don't think I can make it through this dinner without you. What will I say to Ulpus? There's nothing to say to Ulpus. But my father expects me to say something, do something. This is such a mess. Please? I'd be so grateful."

Decia looked up from her portion of the scene. Lucilia wasn't making much progress and in fact had been waving a shuttle around in mid air, gesticulating as she spoke; her threads had become quite tangled.

"All right, all right," Decia said. "Just quit flapping that shuttle around, will you? You're going to ruin the piece if you don't settle down. I'll stay for supper. Call a man. I should send word to my father so he doesn't worry after me."

Lucilia nodded, but didn't make a motion to get up or summon anyone. She tried to steady her hands and start untangling the shuttle from the yarn on the loom, but it was more difficult to compose herself in Decia's presence than she had thought it would be.

Decia continued to weave Lucretia's piled hair the entire time, never so much as missing a single detail. Lucilia frowned down at her own sloppy work, wishing she were half as patient, or skilled, as Decia.

2

Day 1: Evening

Lucilia had put new oil into the lamps on the pedestals standing along the periphery of the meeting room several times already. She and Decia must have been working for hours, though it seemed they hadn't gotten much work done on the tapestry. Weaving was a tedious pastime, though; that was why Lucilia had never been very good at it. Soon she would be summoned, would have to make conversation with a man she didn't want to marry, would have to simper at his polite blandishments, would have to giggle at his jokes, would have to feign interest where none existed. Would she be any better at that? It seemed unlikely.

"I was hoping to at least have the torso finished, but all the detail makes the work take a long time," she said, squinting at the loom, trying to distinguish which color was the dark blue and which was the brown. It had been growing steadily darker since mid-afternoon, and despite three blazing oil lamps on pedestals nearby, it was impossible to make out which color was which because of the flickering yellow light and the shadows it cast on the walls and the loom itself.

"I know what you mean," said Decia. "I barely have Lucretia's shoulders finished." She pulled up the shuttle for the last time, winding the excess thread around the wooden tool and tucking it into the completed weaving. "Hey, that reminds me. Today's Wednesday. Let's go tonight."

"With all the rumors that have been going around? Not to mention Ulpius and my father? I don't think it's a good idea. What if someone finds out?"

“Who could find out who wouldn’t be in the same spot as us? Besides, dancing. You love dancing. And the wine! It’s not like you get to drink uncut wine whenever you want. You should come with me. It will be fun.” Decia grinned at Lucilia, then immediately stuck her lip out into an adorable pout with which Lucilia was all too familiar. “Come on. You should enjoy yourself.”

“We will see,” said Lucilia, smiling despite her best efforts and her very real consternation about sneaking out of her house that night.

Habilis walked in then, saying that he had arrived to help move the loom. It would have been strange in any other household, as he was a clerk, not a laborer, but he was especially fond of Lucilia and was always willing to help her, no matter what the task. He smiled away Decia’s protestations. He was tall and lanky, but obviously quite strong despite his thinness. The hair was graying near his temples, but he wore it short like a legionnaire anyway, so it hardly betrayed his age. He was the most mentally capable slave her father owned, which is why he had been bought. For years now, he had served her father as accountant and letter writer. Lucilia would wait for another slave to appear before asking him to move the heavy loom.

“Have you heard the news going around?” asked Habilis, moving to stand nearer to Lucilia.

“Aren’t you the gossip,” Decia teased, laughing as Habilis just shook his head.

“No,” said Lucilia. “We haven’t been out since this morning; we’re weaving this story, you see. But tell me, what are they saying now?”

“There’s been a meeting of the *plebs*,” said Habilis. “Or that’s what they called it anyway, but I was nearby when it convened and most of those attending were aristocrats or the senators themselves. Not to mention the Consul.”

“A Consul was there? Which one?” asked Decia. Her face was cool and she was no longer smiling.

“Postumius. Can you believe that?” said Habilis.

Decia shook her head. Lucilia’s mouth had involuntarily turned down into a frown.

“I wonder what this means. Did you happen to find out?” she asked Habilis.

“There’s an investigation underway. He’s already sent proclamations to the outlying villages. Priestesses and priests of Bacchus are requested to turn themselves in for questioning.”

“That’s absurd. There’s nothing to question them about! How could we not have known that this nonsense had gone so far?” Lucilia said.

“Well, Paculla did make that strange decision about the ceremony. Maybe the senate’s actions are the reason why we’re no longer permitted to parade through the city to the hilltop, like we’re supposed to do, like we’ve always done.” Decia sighed. “Are they even still meeting tonight?” she asked, a wrinkle forming on her brow. “It doesn’t seem like a good idea, if the senate’s this serious about their so-called investigation.”

“There has been a prohibition on holding meetings at night,” he said. “But if I know anything about people, I’d bet that they’re still planning to meet, at least to discuss what should be done now.”

Decia looked at Lucilia and raised her eyebrow.

“Are you planning to go?” Lucilia asked Habilis.

“Sh,” said Decia. “I hear someone coming.”

At that moment, Durius walked in the room, staring straight ahead. He was unlike Habilis in every respect. Somehow, he had managed to become rather soft and plump in service to Sextus Lucilius. Lucilia suspected that Lucilius gave him money for occasionally spying on her, but it was hard to distinguish coincidence from espionage in Rome, especially in one’s own *familia*. He was shorter than Habilis, too, but hunched over a bit when he walked, making it hard to judge his true height.

Lucilia cast Habilis a final glance, and then told the two men to move the loom back into her *cubiculum* before dinner. She and Decia walked out of the room together, not saying anything further to Habilis.

“Well, today hasn’t been the best day for good news,” Decia commented once they were well away from the room.

Lucilia didn’t say anything at first. Should she go tonight, just to find out what was going on? Sometimes she felt as though she were horribly uninformed, even for a woman. She couldn’t figure it out, but she seldom knew the latest news from the Forum. She used to ask her father from time to time, but he usually turned her questions aside with a gentle admonition to stick to women’s concerns and let the men

worry themselves sick over business and political affairs. Why did she want to concern herself with things she couldn't do anything about? She'd been forced to turn to Habilis for news.

She had been indignant then, but it had seemed somehow less important when the news involved other people: slaves, foreigners, even matrons. She was none of these things. Why did it matter what restrictions the Senate placed on them or why? The Senate's sudden interest in the Bacchic rites was something she should be concerned about, though. It had been six years since her initiation. That wasn't such a long time, but she barely remembered her life before joining the cult. She had done an adequate job in all that time of keeping her affairs to herself and not letting anyone learning about her nighttime activities, but if the Senate had organized the citizens to report suspicious behavior, she would have to be more on her guard than ever. And Habilis? She was worried about his safety; slaves would most likely be called to task more severely than citizens—that was the way of Rome. Maybe her father would talk about it at dinner, since Ulpius would be there and would likely mention the political landscape to impress her father, but she knew she shouldn't count on it.

When they had reached the relative privacy of her room and both Durius and Habilis had gone, she felt an enormous pressure suddenly ease up. She took a few deep breaths—she would have to make the decision now or not at all. Once they went down to dinner, she wasn't sure how much time they would have alone together before Decia had to leave for the night.

“We’d better go,” Lucilia said quietly. “How will we know what’s going on if we don’t? There’s always trolling around in the Forum for gossip, but I’d hate to have to rely on word of mouth for something that’s spreading like wildfire already and could affect us so directly. Yes, let’s go.”

“I’m glad we can count on Habilis,” said Decia.

“Me, too. I don’t know how we’d ever find anything out without him. He’s the only one I really trust. Ever since I was a little girl”

“I know. He’s been like a second father to you. Habilia,” said Decia, sticking her tongue out at her friend. “That’s what I’m going to call you from now on if you keep on with such sentimental reflections.”

“Oh, fine, go on. As if you don’t love him, too.”

“It’d be hard not to with all he’s done for us,” said Decia. “Remember when he taught us to read?”

Lucilia nodded. Those had been good times. They’d blundered through the Homer and the other Greek epic poets together, enjoying every minute of it, to the extreme displeasure of Lucilia’s father. Decia had even gotten herself banned from the house once for refusing to stop reciting snatches of the *Odyssey* during supper. It had infuriated Lucilius, for whom Greek had never been anything but a struggle. Lucilia wondered that things had hardly changed in her life since then. All those years, and still her father was threatened by anything he didn’t understand. He was probably only angry about her loom work because he couldn’t weave effectively himself if he wanted to.

By dinnertime, Lucilia could barely suppress her curiosity about the Senate's recent decree. She'd been furiously jabbing her shuttle through the threads on the loom since the men had brought it to her room. She'd paid little attention to the order of the colors and taken no time to concern herself when the threads got tangled. Decia had reprimanded her twice already. She was pacing back and forth behind Decia's shoulder when one of the servants entered the room to summon them to dinner. Lucilia practically jumped to follow the boy, whom she recognized as a new but efficient waiter. Decia was slower to follow, carefully winding her yarn onto the various spools so that it would stay neat and be ready for when she came back to it. Lucilia grabbed an extra *palla* from a peg on the wall as she left, wrapping it snugly around her shoulders. The shawl was red and fashionable without being ostentatious, while still providing warmth that she knew would be needed in such a drafty room.

When they entered the dining room, Lucilia and Decia took their usual seats at the table. Lucilia's father did not approve of the recent adoption of Eastern customs, despite the rather lascivious frescoes in his business room, so instead of reclining on couches to dine from communal trays, all the guests were seated at a sturdy oaken table, eating from their own individual plates. Not even the men were permitted to recline. Lucilia barely noticed the frescoes on the wall, being already overly familiar with the flowery scenes that covered three of the four walls. She thought it was strange to paint one's dining area to look like a garden, but the choice had been her father's, and he had not consulted her on the decision. After all these years, though, it had grown on her and she no longer minded that the leaves were slightly off-color or that

the flowers were much dimmer than they would have been in nature. Anyway, she figured these things were consequences of her father being ill-able to afford the decorations. Paintings done on a tight budget often looked clumsy and lacked the accuracy of form and color of more expensive works.

The dinner itself was good. The food was plain but abundant, and the wine was sweet. There was an appetizer of hardboiled eggs, followed by fried roe, and fruit trays and cheese for dessert. Without thinking, Lucilia poured herself a second glass of wine. Realizing what she'd done too late, she looked to Decia, who was smiling and shaking her head. The men hadn't noticed, though. And neither had her mother. Thank goodness! The punishment for overindulging was steep—Lucilia would probably lose her freedom to walk about unattended for at least the next week if she was caught. And with the investigation, who knew if she wouldn't be reported for excessive drinking. She had caught enough of the rumors to know that that was one of the things people were saying about the Bacchantes: excessive drinking, dancing, and mingling of the sexes. It was a ludicrous charge, since the aristocrats generally comported themselves this way—in private anyway. However, that wouldn't stop the Senate from using these flimsy excuses as a pretext for their witch hunt. Lucilia wondered what they hoped to gain from this persecution.

“So, Lucilia, your father tells me that you've been weaving,” Ulpus said, looking across the table at her.

Lucilia didn't like to think that she'd have to marry a man almost twice her age, one who no doubt had similar ideals to her father's. But at least he wasn't entirely

without good qualities. His hair was atypically light, and would have been wavy had he let it grow. But as he had spent a number of years in the legions, she knew he always wore a military cut, short and simple. He was wearing a deep blue toga, with a golden border. And she couldn't help but notice how it accented his grey eyes. Together, they made her think of the sea during a storm. And he was tall, too, which always helped a man's looks.

"Yes, it's a pastime I'm very fond of," said Lucilia, blushing when she noticed Decia grimacing at her. She had probably noticed Lucilia scrutinizing Ulpius. "Decia and I have been working all day."

Valeria, her mother, beamed at this, but Lucilia thought she looked pale and haggard despite her smiling visage.

"Really, Lucilia," said her father, "you shouldn't make so much of it. I would hardly classify weaving as work."

"Ah. What are you weaving?" asked Ulpius, ignoring Lucilius.

"Decia suggested that we weave a scene from the Rape of Lucretia."

"What a suitable topic for two young ladies to turn into a decorative project," Ulpius said. "Which part of the tale?"

"The part where Lucretia tells her husband and father about Tarquinius' crime," said Decia when Lucilia didn't respond.

"I see," said Ulpius, looking back and forth between the two women. "Well, you know what I always say, Sextus: women are best when they're left to amuse

themselves in such homely efforts. I like to see a woman busy at the loom; it shows her patriotism.”

“Well, you know what I say,” said Lucilia’s father, taking a drink of wine.

“The only patriotic women are ones engaged in the remembrance of their ancestors’ morals. I can’t think of a better way for my daughter to pass her free time than in contemplation of the traditions that have made our state so great. Your indulgence of her is very kind, though.”

Lucilia ate one of the olives, carefully removing the pit from her mouth once she had parsed the flesh from it. Decia was busily engaged in examining the dregs of her wine. She wouldn’t forget and pour herself another glass, Lucilia knew; she was too careful for that sort of mistake. Valeria was gazing at nothing in particular, but Lucilia caught an occasional glance in her direction. She hoped her mother wouldn’t start pestering her about etiquette. Usually, when they had company, especially when she’d had other suitors in the past, her mother pointed out every little thing she did wrong.

The men resumed their talk about politics and Lucilius’ bid for a Senatorial seat. Ulpus was eager to discuss the wars in Spain, though, invested as he was in the outcome. He had family in the province, a few younger brothers, who worked every day to secure the province for Rome, and a cousin who’d married a centurion stationed in Hispania. Her father had told her these things as if they were selling points for Ulpus’ proposal, as if having family at the furthest reach of the Republic would make him seem worldly, more desirable to her.

“Besides the fact that Hispania is an essential training ground for military campaigns in Gaul and Lusitania, won’t it be nice to know that Rome has a new source of grain,” he said. “I, for one, have always been leery of relying so heavily on Egypt.”

“But how do you feel about all these Gallic and Ligurian mercenaries?” Lucilius asked. “It seems a strange thing to entrust the security of the Republic to foreign vagabonds whose only allegiance is to the profit they can win in warfare.”

“I suppose. But I believe that it’s possible for people in the provinces to feel a certain patriotism, to want to defend and protect their country’s interest, even if they aren’t native Romans,” said Ulpus.

“Hah. But how can we know which country they’re really looking out for?” asked Lucilius.

“Does that matter? What’s good for the arm is good for the whole body,” said Ulpus. “If they even just care strongly for the welfare of their own provinces it will be beneficial to the integrity of the Republic.”

“If nothing else,” said Decia, “you ought to be glad we’ve so many Numidians interested in cavalry duty. They’re world-renowned fighters, as I’m sure you can recall from their frequent fame in the arenas,” said Decia.

Lucilia coughed, nearly choking on her wine when she heard Decia speak out against her father’s opinion. But Ulpus agreed with her.

“You’re right,” he said. “The Numidians alone are worth the risk of including foreign mercenaries into Roman forces. I’ve seen how they can fight. While everyone

knows there's no one better than a Thracian when cornered, the Numidians have elegant tact and are often better strategist for the larger gladiatorial battles than any of the other gladiators. Gauls, too, have a certain knack. But as yet, you know their situation is too unsteady to rely as heavily on them in warfare as on the other provinces."

"Old grudges do die hard," agreed Lucilius, trying to reinsert himself into the conversation.

"But all of this is quite distant from us here," said Ulpus. "What about this cult they're talking about? The cult of Bacchus. Does the Senate have a right to condemn a religious group just because they prefer to practice their rites during the nighttime? I, for one, think it's a frivolous waste of Roman taxes. Personally, I'd rather see my money go to ending hostilities in any number of the provinces than to suppressing what used to be a perfectly acceptable mode of worship here."

"I don't know, Ulpus," said Sextus Lucilius. "I can't help but think that if we really do have some raving group of religious fanatics running around, it would be better to curb their excesses before they spill over into daily life. I believe in decorum and modesty, neither of which qualities does this cult seem to exhibit."

Lucilia barely restrained a snort as she looked at Decia to gauge her reaction. But, as always, Decia appeared calm, although she now had a vague furrow on her brow—ostensibly out of concern for the waste of taxpayers' money or for the lack of decorum the Bacchantes showed.

“Hm. So, then you don’t believe the things they’re saying about the members? The . . . Bacchantes?” asked Ulpus.

“The rumors?” asked Lucilius. “Oh yes, I’m sure that’s got something to do with it. But really, what the *plebs* do should hardly concern the Senate. I think it has more to do with what their wives are up to. Imagine what it would do to the integrity of the State if all these staunch Roman matrons that are supposedly involved really are going out and sleeping with young men at these festivals as often as five times a month. We would never know whose son was whose! It would wreak havoc on aristocratic stability.”

Lucilia looked up from her food and saw her mother staring at her, a grimace on her face. Lucilia looked to Decia, wondering if what Ulpus said was true and knowing that it must be. But she merely shrugged; neither of the women had heard anything about the involvement of matrons being at issue until now.

“You’re probably right,” said Ulpus, “After all, what possible threat could a bunch of slaves and women be to the Roman Senate? It must be more personal than they’re letting on.”

Lucilius let out a snort. “Anyway, I’ll be glad when the whole ordeal is over. I was actually asked by several of my friends in the Senate today whether I was involved at all. Of course, they would have been discrete if I were, but can you believe that? They actually think men are involved in these ridiculous shenanigans, and men of my age. What would men have to do with a women’s cult?”

“A waste of time, for sure,” said Ulpus.

Valeria's glass looked suspiciously fuller than it had a moment before, but Lucilia didn't say anything about it and her mother maintained her peace, as always.

"If it's just a women's cult, how can it pose any threat to Rome?" asked Decia, smiling at the two men as if to suggest the mere thought was silly.

"Who knows," said Ulpus, "I suppose they're just being overly cautious, and who can blame them? The consuls always have to be on the lookout for a potential uprising, and sometimes the source of dissent comes from an improbable sector of society."

"Like how slaves who try to escape are executed?" Decia asked.

"Sort of," said Sextus. "Execution isn't a lot different from how the Senate plans to handle this situation, I hear. Although I don't believe that they'll actually put their own wives to death. No, it seems more likely that the people who are really going to suffer in this are going to be those who have the least influence in society anyway."

Ulpus shook his head.

"So you think people will actually be killed because of this?" asked Valeria. It was the first thing she had said, and everyone was slightly surprised to hear her speak up.

"Assuredly," said Ulpus. "It's part of the decree that passed today. Well, it's sort of implicit within the words, but that's what will happen."

"Implicit how?" asked Decia.

"Well," Ulpus said, "the decree doesn't specify the manner of punishment, but it does exhort all citizens to turn over the names of any whom they suspect of having

involvement in the cult. It also importunes families to deal with wayward wives in any manner they see fit. And, well, you know how family tribunals go—someone’s always having their pride injured or their feelings hurt. Mark my words, there are going to be executions, of one form or another, because of this mess. And all because some uppity slave wants to rise out of her station.”

“What’s this about a slave climbing the social ladder?” asked Valeria.

Lucilia thought her mother’s eyes looked very bright, almost as if she might cry. Lucilia couldn’t remember the last time she had seen her mother cry.

“Sextus!” admonished Ulpus. “A wife should be a reflection of her husband’s wisdom and good sense. How can Valeria hope to represent you well if you don’t tell her anything?” He turned to Valeria, taking one of her hands in his, “Let me tell you the state of things, Lady.”

Ulpus immediately set to informing Valeria, and Lucilia and Decia who were listening closely, about the recent news. It appeared that there was some courtesan, by the name of Hisbala, who had started the whole thing. According to Ulpus, she had managed to woo a young aristocrat from an influential family, but he refused to say which young noble. Apparently he was in the middle of some family intrigue anyway that amounted to his mother wanting him to be initiated into the cult of Bacchus. She had promised the god that she would have her son initiated into the cult as soon as he was well in return for his health. Ulpus said that Hisbala claimed to have thought the whole thing was some elaborate scheme of the poor boy’s stepfather to wrest power from him by having him discredited as a member of a scandalous cult. So she

convinced him to go to the consul Postumius, who had listened to the story like a gossip-hungry peasant. The man's grandmother was consulted and all sorts of other measures were taken, but finally Hisbala and her lover were rewarded and his mother and stepfather were punished. However, Hisbala's testimony had the unintended consequence of inciting the Senate into suspicion of the Bacchantes. She had told Senators and Consul alike about the mingling of the sexes within the cult rites. The Senate began its investigation shortly thereafter, compelled to investigate any allegation of such perfidious criminal behavior.

"And this is social-climbing how?" asked Valeria, ignoring the question Ulpius had first posed to her.

"Well, it wouldn't be," said Ulpius, "except for her lover's status and financial standing. The Consul did give her a substantial reward, though: he made her a freedwoman and gave her the right to hold property in her name."

"He didn't!" exclaimed Decia. "That would give her complete control over her financial affairs. The Roman tradition frowns on that. If what you're saying is true, the gift Postumius bestowed upon that slave was a priceless thing indeed."

"Oh, but he did," said Sextus Lucilius. "It's shameful, if you ask me. Garnering knowledge about such an important case by bribing a whore. But that's exactly what he did, and it worked, too. She also told him that they meet at night, not because of the religious significance of the time, but to conceal the sounds and sights of their heinous crimes."

"You mean the drinking and carousing?" asked Valeria.

“To start with!” said Ulpus. “But they’re also blaming a lot of recent murders on the cult, too. I wouldn’t be surprised if this becomes a rehash of the matron trials; poisoning hasn’t been ruled out as one of the cult’s goals, though it’s unclear whether they have the level of organization necessary to carry out such a serious crime. The Senate is convinced that they’re an organized and financially independent entity, though.”

“If I were them,” said Lucilius Sextus, “I wouldn’t be caught. I would flee Rome the first chance I got.”

“But isn’t that what they’re doing?” asked Valeria.

“No, actually,” Lucilius said. “We have no reason to think that they are. While there are many citizens traveling abroad, that’s not unusual for this season, what with the weather growing warmer each day. The seas themselves are beginning to warm and grow restless again, the ice has melted, and trade is resuming all around the world. People can’t stay stationary if we expect civilization to progress.”

“How do you know that those leaving really are just going for trading opportunities and not because they’re Bacchantes fleeing the investigation?” asked Lucilia.

Both men were silent for several long minutes, glancing at each other several times. Finally, Ulpus spoke up.

“I suppose we can’t know for sure,” he said.

“Right,” agreed Lucilius. “It’s a bit of a numbers game. You see, as long as there aren’t huge droves of people leaving Rome all at once, we can be pretty sure that they aren’t fleeing from the investigation.”

“What makes you think that the Bacchantes would travel together?” asked Decia. “Why couldn’t they go in smaller groups or one at a time?”

“You don’t know anything about religion if you think these mystery cults work that way,” said Lucilius.

Ulpus nodded. “Sextus speaks harshly, but he has a point. According to most reports of the cult, the cult experience is a sort of mad frenzy, spurred on by erratic dancing in large groups and conspicuous consumption of wine. This suggests that they may feel no urge to identify with the cult outside of ceremonial circumstances, ones in which members are surrounded by other members. A sort of herd mentality plays a large part in their commitment—peer pressure. Even if they are organized, their organization comes from numbers; what would two or three Bacchantes know to do on their own against the Roman Senate, an august body numbering close to three hundred members? Why would they even feel compelled to flee, when surely there’s no way they could be found out so long as they stayed away from cult gatherings and didn’t turn one another in? Even a group of three hundred men is paltry compared to purported numbers of the Bacchantes. No, it’s the numbers and the influence of the high priestess that goads them into action and devotion; on their own, none of the Bacchantes would be faithful—to each other or to Bacchus.”

Lucilia scoffed audibly, but no one paid her any heed.

“The cult is an ancient one,” said Valeria. “You malign them if you consider them inept as individuals. Nothing exists hundreds of years without some way of looking out for itself.”

Lucilius grimaced, but both Ulpus and Decia only nodded in Valeria’s direction.

“You have a good point,” Ulpus said to her. “But matters of *religio* are more complex than they may at first appear.”

“If you’re finished, Lucilia,” Lucilius said, “you may run along back to your loom or whatever it is you’re planning to do. When you leave, Decia, let me know and I’ll have a man escort you since it will be dark out and unsafe in the streets for a young woman such as yourself to be out all alone.”

Lucilia was annoyed by the abrupt dismissal, but she had no way of rebuffing her father without being conspicuously insubordinate. After making their goodbyes, they exited the room along with Valeria, who knew she had crossed the line and was being dismissed along with the young women.

The sound of Ulpus and Lucilius chattering about gossip and rumors followed the three women out of the room and down the hallway. Though considerably dimmer than the dining room, the hallway was at least wide enough to allow the women to walk comfortably without having to worry about accidentally bumping into each other in the dark. In his effort to save money, Lucilius refused to keep unessential areas of the *domus* lit after dark, so although there were candles in sconces lining down the wall, the slaves were never permitted to light them. It was only through years of

walking the same corridors that Lucilia knew the way to her room. The women walked down the hall in silence, listening to the voices of Lucilius and Ulpus grow fainter with each step. After several silent moments, Lucilia moved up to walk beside her mother.

“Thank you,” she said, catching her mother’s arm to stop her.

Valeria met her gaze and nodded. “Sometimes your father’s blatant disregard for logic infuriates me. And then to see Ulpus, such a bright young man, making the same errors in judgment—it’s shameful, to think that . . .”

Decia and Lucilia waited in silence, but when Valeria didn’t say anything else, they just nodded their heads.

“I think I’ll retire now,” said Valeria. “My energy is not as great as it once was, and neither is my patience. Have a good night, girls. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Lucilia gave her mother a hug.

“And Lucilia, dear, be careful.”

“Goodnight, Valeria,” said Decia.

“What do you think she meant?” asked Lucilia once they were back in her cubiculum and seated on her bed. She had lit a candle with a flint she kept on the table beside her bed because even though it was only around eight in the evening, it was pitch black in the house without any lights. In the flickering candlelight, Decia’s skin looked much paler than in the light of day. “Be careful? Careful of what? Surely she doesn’t know about us . . . or the cult.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” said Decia, grasping Lucilia’s hand in her own and squeezing it affectionately. “That was an awful conversation at dinner. It probably just has her feeling nervous. Not least of all, because of her husband’s harsh reaction.”

“You’re probably right,” said Lucilia. “It was an awful way to talk about people like that, and then to just send us from the table as though we were small children.”

“Talk about people like what?” Decia asked.

“Well, like they’re just cattle to be slaughtered. It made me think of those priestesses that they sometimes starve to death.”

“I know what you mean,” said Decia. “It’s very callous of them, but that’s how they view life; it isn’t a gift to them, it’s a possession to be bartered or traded for whatever they can get out of it. It has no real value in itself.”

The two women lapsed into a tense silence. Lucilia couldn’t understand her father’s temper, or why even the slightest indication of a rebuff set him off. What’s more, she couldn’t understand why he didn’t exercise any restraint, as would be appropriate. At times like these, she was glad that Habilis had educated her so well as a young child. At least she knew when she saw wrong being done, and wasn’t naively accepting of bad behavior because of her ignorance. She longed for the time when she and Decia had stayed up late into the night, studying their Greek characters and learning to recite the dactylic hexameter of the most famous Latin poets in perfect cadence. Lucilia’s mother had always brought them a snack before sending Decia home to her own house, and would often even deign to stay and listen as they read

first Latin and then Greek aloud, practicing pronunciation and elision. She always praised them, and would often stay after they had gone from the small room that had served as their schoolroom to discuss with Habilis their progress and the next lesson plan. She had been lucky to have Decia as a neighbor, so close in age and needing education as well, with a father who was willing to give some of his income to Lucilius to see to it that his daughter was educated alongside Lucilia, since his own slaves were less than adequate for the job.

“Don’t you feel bad for her, though?” asked Decia finally.

“Do I feel bad for my mother? Not particularly. Why, should I?” Lucilia asked, scooting over closer to Decia on the small bed.

“I don’t know. She just seems sad. Then there’s the way your father treats her like she doesn’t have anything good to say. It would be a disheartening way to live.”

“She’s always like that,” said Lucilia. “You don’t think she looked worse, do you? I try to tell her she should get out and do more, but she maintains that she has no place outside of the home. I can’t convince her otherwise. And I guess she is the one who married my father, so the blame isn’t entirely his in the matter.”

Decia sighed and flopped onto Lucilia’s mattress.

“Maybe we should ask her to come with us,” she suggested, picking at the quilt that lay on the bed. It was fine, something Lucilia’s mother had made in her youth. It had a beautiful pattern of trees juxtaposed beside flowers, all stitched in tiny, elaborate needlework onto small squares that had then been sewn together.

“So she can turn us in to my father and the Senate?” asked Lucilia, a note of bitterness in her voice.

“I don’t think she would do that,” said Decia. “She does love you, you know. She’s just had a hard life. Look at your father! He probably only sent us away because I asked a question about his so-called ‘men’s affairs’. I shouldn’t have, maybe. But I was curious.”

Lucilia sat down beside her friend.

“We have to both be sure that she won’t betray us. This is very serious. I don’t think it’s a good time,” she said.

“Oh, and when is? What if they actually dissolve the cult?” asked Decia.

“Surely it won’t go that far. Many people are involved and it is a religious group; it’s not as if we’re practicing sacrilege or anything.”

“But they think that we are,” said Decia. “Gods, sometimes I think that we are.”

“I guess I see what you mean,” Lucilia said. “If they find out, they will end our gatherings. They’re already trying to. I just don’t know if we can trust her; I’m afraid for what would happen if we can’t.

“Don’t you think she deserves the same opportunity as we do? That she deserves people who will care about her and support her? That she shouldn’t suffer in silence without even a close friend in whom she can confide?”

“Yes, I think these things are important,” said Lucilia, sighing. “Yes, she should be invited. But not tonight. It’s too dangerous right now. And anyway, while

no one will particularly miss us, my father might miss her if he decides not to visit the slave quarter for his entertainment tonight. You know how he can be: one minute he's concerned about upholding Roman *mores* and pure lineages, and the next he's risking the contamination of his own line by sleeping with those poor women."

"Okay. I still think we shouldn't wait, though. We've already had to move our gatherings from the sacred grove to that damp cellar. Who knows what all of this will come to in the end? We may need numbers more than we need our solidarity."

"You should be leaving soon. We don't want to draw any attention from my father," said Lucilia, taking Decia's hand in her own.

"We'll meet in a few hours. Be especially cautious tonight, Luc; they probably have people watching for women walking around after dark."

Lucilia nodded her assent. The two women stood up together, hand-in-hand. Lucilia kissed her friend in lingering parting, tasting the sweet wine still moistening Decia's lips. Lucilia whispered to her that they should meet in their usual place, as it was sure to be free from spies. She watched as Decia walked back down the hall in the direction of the dining room, her hips swaying gently from side to side, and her shoulders held straight and upright.

3

Day 1: Nighttime

Lucilia lay on her thin mattress, looking up at the ceiling of her bedroom. Beside the lit candle on the small table next to her bed, there was a small, nearly opaque hourglass. The hourglass had been another unnecessary expense her father had complained about. He had said it was cheaply made—a bad deal. And while she had to admit that the glass of the object must have been cheaply made because she could barely make out the thin stream of yellow sand marking the passing time through the thickness and imperfections in the glass, she treasured the piece as another token of success against her father's need to control everything and everyone around him. She had turned the glass two times since Decia had left; it would be time to leave any minute now. She could feel her heart racing inside her chest in anticipation of the night to come.

She could still remember her first time like it had just happened yesterday. The scene of her initiation was vivid in her mind. It had happened seven years ago, when she'd been barely more than thirteen years old. Habilis had been hinting about it for a year before she'd taken him seriously enough to hear him out. It would help her become more independent, he had said. It would help her understand why she shouldn't get so upset about the way Lucilius treated her, not because it was right, but because it was the symptom of a worse malady—oppression of everyone who wasn't patrician and male. That was wrong, he had said. He could help her understand why. And what she could do to establish some freedoms anyway. She'd agreed to go with

him that night, even though her father had expressly forbidden her to go out of doors after dark. She had gone anyway, and even consented to wear the crown of ivy around her forehead, to carry the stick of fennel, to let her feet go naked on the soft soil outside of the city. He had taken her to a place not more than an hour's walk outside of Rome, but it had seemed like an adventure into a wild, foreign land. They'd entered a grove of ancient trees so hoary with age that some of them no longer bore leaves at all, but were merely tall stalks of wood standing perpendicular to the ground. The grove had been crowded with people—mainly women and young girls—all singing in a joyous tone. She had asked Habilis what they were singing about, but he had merely hushed her, insisting that she remain patient, pay attention, and wait for her time to join in:

“I shall recall to mind how Dionysos, son of glorious Semele,
 appeared by the shore of the barren sea
 on a jutting headland, looking like a young man
 in the first bloom of manhood. His beautiful dark hair
 danced about him, and on his stout shoulders he wore
 a purple cloak. Soon on a well-benched ship
 pirates moved forward swiftly on the wine-dark sea;
 They were Tyresians led by an evil doom. When they saw him
 they signaled to each other and then leapt out and quickly seized him
 and put him on board their ship, glad in their hearts.
 They thought he was the son of a Zeus-cherished king

and wanted to bind him with painful shackles.

But the shackles could not hold him and the withes fell away from his hands and feet; and he sat there smiling with his dark eyes. When the helmsman perceived what this meant, he quickly called upon his shipmates and said:

‘Why do you seize and bind this mighty god, you crazy men?

Our well-made ship cannot even carry him!’”*

When her turn had finally come, she was weeping with feelings she couldn’t understand. A young woman, who she later found out was the high priestess, instructed her to unbind her hair and disrobe. There was no need to be ashamed of her body, she had said; all of the world’s bounty was a divine gift, and thus beautiful and perfect without ornamentation. She’d looked around at all the other nude people, then did as the priestess asked, letting her short adolescent’s tunic fall to the ground in a pool around her feet. Then the priestess held a goblet to her lips and bade her drink slowly of the blessed wine. After that, the priestess instructed her to sing along with the rest of the worshippers, to dance when they all danced, and to partake in any activity that she wished. The priestess insisted that here, it did not matter what her father demanded of her. Here, Lucilia was to do as she pleased. Here, Lucilia would have friends and companions who would accept whatever decisions she made without trying to impose their will on her. Here, she was free from societal restrictions. She had recognized several of the household servants among the gathering. How glad she

had been to see familiar faces, how glad to see that there was more to the life of a slave than serving wealthy masters.

Of course, these days the cult had to be more careful. They could no longer gather in that cherished mountain grove, no longer march in procession in celebration of Libertus, or even join hands in the streets without raising suspicion from their fellow Romans. The world seemed to grow smaller, more bitter, with each passing year. But she couldn't understand why or how. Was it really that the world was smaller, or was it rather that her own mind and experiences were much broader?

When the sand finally ran down all the way, signaling that it was approaching midnight, Lucilia retrieved her *thyrsus* from its hiding place beneath her mattress. She ran her hand affectionately along the wooden stalk of fennel she had been given upon initiation, worn smooth by all the years of being carried and brandished in celebration. She placed the *thyrsus** into the hood of her *palla* and then plaited her hair into an appropriate braid, pulling the collar of her *palla* up tightly under her chin. Although she despised the cloak, it was convenient for concealing her *thyrsus*, which would be essential to gain her admittance into the cult's meeting place. She also retrieved a wooden mask, such as actors wear in the theatre, from a small box beside the hourglass on her nightstand. It wasn't large enough to cover her entire face, but would conceal most of her distinguishing features should she feel a desire for obscurity.

Treasures in tow, she blew out the candle in the wall sconce near her door, slipped silently out of her room, and crept through the familiar darkness of her house at night. She moved swiftly, worried that she might be late while simultaneously

concerned that she would be caught before she even got out of her house. While she was thinking of what might happen to her if such a thing occurred, she bumped headfirst into something very solid and nearly tripped.

She stifled a gasp and blinked rapidly, trying to make her eyes work in the darkness.

Whatever she had bumped into was moving beside her, but not rapidly.

“Lucilia,” it whispered. “Is that you?”

“Gods, Habilis!” Lucilia gasped. “Don’t sneak up on me like that. What are you doing anyway?”

“Sh,” he said. “Be quiet until we get outside, would you?” Habilis reached for her arm and caught it on the first try.

Together, they left the house through a side door from the kitchen, coming out onto the *Via Labicana* in the merchant quarter of the city, just outside the Forum.

“I’m surprised you decided to come, considering the rumors,” said Habilis. He was still speaking in a hushed tone even though they were now out of the house.

“I’m still hoping there’s a chance that this whole mess will just blow over,” said Lucilia. “Surely the Senate can’t pass a decree that would make thousands of people outlaws over night, not without proof of heinous crimes.”

“I’m not so sure you’re right about that,” said Habilis. “This is the Roman Senate we’re talking about. You know what they did to those matrons who supposedly poisoned* their husbands several generations ago? I heard by rumor that it was really

just a bad harvest of fish that carried some strange sickness, but I would trust the source of the rumor more than the Senate.”

“You’ve told me about this a thousand times,” said Lucilia. “Apparently, the matrons tried to argue in their defense, but were summarily castigated and condemned to execution by the majority of the Senators,” she said, mimicking Habilis’ deep voice and serious tone.

“Exactly,” said Habilis, “I know that was quite some time ago and long before you or even I were old enough to know anything about anything, but the Senate is still the Senate, and if they stand for anything, they stand for upholding tradition, even if that tradition is the maintenance of order by the trial and execution of countless innocent victims. Don’t take them lightly. It’s impossible for ordinary people such as us to know just what they’re capable of.”

Typically, Lucilia would have rolled her eyes at what she’d always taken to be Habilis’ paranoia, but this time, she wondered if he didn’t have a point. She ducked into an alley, pulling Habilis along by the hand. They walked down the alley for only a short time before finally coming to the warehouse. It smelled vaguely of cinnamon and coriander; Lucilia suspected that it had once belonged to the husband of one of the priestesses, but that was unconfirmed. Lucilia carefully removed her *thyrsus* from the hood of her cloak and used it to strike the wooden door several times in a rapid beat that sounded a bit like an old dance tune to which a child might skip rope. A pale face peered out of a crack as the door opened from within.

“*Saltatio vitae*.” Lucilia whispered the password before she could be asked to do so. The traditional greeting, *the dance of life*, had taken on a sinister aspect with the Senate’s recent prohibition of the cult despite the fact that it had originally been meant to be light-hearted and recall pleasant memories.

The door opened fully and two burly men ushered Lucilia and Habilis into the warehouse. They were each holding brightly shining oil lamps up at eye-level, presumably to see the newcomers better. Lucilia recognized the Gnaeus, the fairer-haired of the two men, as someone she’d often seen and occasionally danced with—he had the same crooked grin she’d found so endearing under better circumstances. The other man was neither attractive nor hideous; there was a scar across his neck, but anyone who had done his citizen’s duty and served in the legion could have accrued the same injury or any of a number of others. His hair was raven black and too long for such straight hair, giving him an unwashed look.

“Are you the guards, then?” Habilis asked them.

“Yes,” said Gnaeus. He favored Lucilia with a broad smile and a wink before gesturing for them to move along.

Lucilia smiled at Gnaeus, but gave him no other sign of her recognition. The guards were not necessarily menacing in aspect, but their mere presence would at least serve to ward off intruders, and to keep out those who weren’t supposed to be there. She was glad for this proof that the head priestess was taking the danger seriously, but she hoped Paculla would still caution everyone to be on the lookout for danger from the authorities anyway.

She and Habilis continued into the room along a path of light blue rugs. On either side of the path were pedestals with oil lamps turned down so that they provided only minimal illumination. It was too dark to tell now, but Lucilia knew that the rugs were embroidered with elaborate patterns of birds and roe in the woods.

Once they were several yards past the guards, a very young girl appeared on the illuminated path a few paces in front of Lucilia. Lucilia cocked her head to the side, trying to figure out why the girl looked familiar, but she couldn't recall her name, or if she even knew the girl's name to begin with. The girl herself was probably no older than twelve. Lucilia remembered when she had been this girl's age; she, too, had been initiated right after puberty. It was traditional, and assured that the girls' first allegiance would be to the cult, and not to potential suitors. Rare exceptions were made for those who wished to be initiated beyond childhood, but usually these were only made in the case of widows or the few women who managed to resist marriage until they were no longer marriageable by Roman standards. The men in the cult were another thing altogether. Lucilia knew that there hadn't always been men involved, but now it seemed natural that they should be. Then again, the acceptance of men into the cult had been what triggered the Senate's ire.

"*Saltate bene,*" the girl said to them, stepping aside to let them pass if they would. *Dance well.*

"Have you seen a young woman, around my age, with brown hair—lighter than mine, and eyes the color of the sky on a fair summer afternoon? Her name's Decia. Maybe you know her?"

The girl shook her head and then inclined it delicately to one side. “I’m Secunda.”

Lucilia introduced herself and then Habilis in turn, smiling warmly at this girl who was so like herself at that age.

“Paculla says I’m not to be admitted into the actual festivities yet,” Secunda said. “She says that I’ll require a proper initiation, and that can only take place of a Saturday evening.”

“That’s not unusual, dear,” said Lucilia. “More are able to attend on rest night than in the middle of the week when they have to rise with the sun to begin their labors. Be patient.” Nevertheless, she exchanged a brief and concerned glance with Habilis—since when did Paculla allow uninitiated individuals into the cult ceremony?

“Do you enjoy weaving?” Lucilia asked, as much to divert Secunda’s mind from the imminent initiation as to distract herself from the nagging suspicions she was having about this girl who claimed to be there with Paculla’s permission.

“Very much, yes. But I’m not good enough to weave on my own yet; I still work closely with my mother,” Secunda said.

“Would you like to come to my house to weave tomorrow?” asked Lucilia, smiling at the child. “I’m fairly decent at it myself, and I’m sure that Decia will be able to assist you much more than I or your mother ever could. Her mother weaves for her living, you know?”

“Really?” asked Secunda. “She’s the right to earn her own living? That’s wonderful!”

“Well, not exactly,” said Lucilia, laughing at the thought. “She gives them to her husband, Gnaeus Decius, to sell. But still, without her invaluable and tireless efforts, I’m sure that he would have gone bankrupt long ago.”

Secunda laughed, too. “I’d like to, then.”

“All right,” said Lucilia. “I will send Habilis for you in the morning. Where do you live?”

“With Paculla,” said Secunda. “I’m her youngest daughter.”

Lucilia raised an eyebrow at Habilis, but he just shrugged. “Take care, then,” she said to Secunda, “I will see you in the morning, if I don’t see you again at the meeting,” said Lucilia.

Before Lucilia could move away, Secunda flung her arms around the older woman, thanking her and assuring her that she really couldn’t stand waiting for her initiation. Then Secunda abruptly turned back to welcome the next person through the door, a young slave named Servilia, who Lucilia had spoke with briefly on several occasions regarding the proper mixture of herbal tinctures.

Lucilia wasn’t sure if she should raise an alarm or hold her tongue about Secunda, but seeing that Servilia didn’t seem surprised either, she decided to let the matter pass for now. She’d known Paculla for years, and she had never known that Paculla Annia, head priestess of the cult, had even one daughter, let alone two. The first one had never been initiated, or if she had, her relationship to Paculla had been kept secret. And although the priestess had initiated her sons, one twenty and the other twenty-four, that had been a recent affair. Lucilia wasn’t really surprised, though.

Many Roman citizens looked down on the cult, even when it had been another accepted mystery cult in the Republic. Paculla was a nice woman; Lucilia had known her for several years now. She couldn't imagine that Paculla would initiate anyone into the cult who was unwilling. The delay of her sons' initiations had had something to do with their father's wishes, she was sure. Paculla might be a strong priestess, but influencing a son against his father was a difficult thing to do. This was just one more potential disaster she would have to ask Paculla about when she saw her, but first Lucilia wanted to speak with Paculla about Ulpus.

"That was strange," said Habilis.

"Very," said Lucilia. "I think I should mention it to Paculla. You've known her as long as I have. Have you ever heard anything about her having a daughter?"

"No," said Habilis. "You should go tell her before the meeting begins. She trusts you as if you were her own child. This incident could mean nothing, or it could mean that we've been found out. It's better to be overly cautious than risk the lives of so many people."

Habilis walked off then, saying that he had people he wanted to greet. Lucilia was surprised that he had not done so earlier. He usually spent these meetings mingling with the other men, freedmen and slaves alike. She watched him walk off across the room toward a dark arch that she knew would lead him below the ground by a less direct route.

Lucilia hastened toward the rear of the large room and through the dark entryway, hoping to find Paculla before the meeting commenced. She knew the high

priestess would be at the rear of the meeting room and accordingly traversed the narrow, stony tunnel as quickly as she could. As she turned the final bend in the tunnel, the throng of people crowded into the subterranean room came into clear view. She could just make out the priestess talking to her two sons, Minius and Herennius Cerrinius.

When Paculla saw Lucilia approaching, she said something to her sons and they left her side.

“Hello, dear,” she said to Lucilia, taking her by the shoulders and exchanging brief kisses on the cheek.

“*Mater*, what are we going to do?” asked Lucilia, addressing the priestess as *mother*.

“We shouldn’t discuss it before everyone is here. But I can assure you of this, I have no intention of allowing those politicians to hunt us down and murder us like dogs. Not yet, anyway.”

Lucilia stifled a sigh. “Is that all you can say to me? How long have we known each other now, Paculla? I thought you might be able to tell me something concrete. I’m very concerned about this.”

Paculla looked sad, but cupped Lucilia’s chin in her hand. “Take heart, child,” she said. “There is always another option you haven’t thought of yet. Just tell me what’s troubling you, and I’ll do my best to help you find an answer.”

Lucilia smiled at the high priestess of Bacchus, squeezing her hand firmly.

“Even if the problem is marriage?” Lucilia asked.

“Especially if the problem is marriage, dear. Stay after the meeting and we will discuss this further in private. There needn’t be spectators, though you should know by now that everyone here is very supportive of you, no matter what you decide to do,” Paculla said, squeezing Lucilia’s hand and returning her smile.

Just as she was going to ask Paculla about the child Secunda, Paculla waved for her sons to return to her. Unsure whether to broach the subject in their presence or not, Lucilia remained silent, thinking it better to talk to Paculla about it later when she returned to discuss the details of the situation with Ulpius. Lucilia gave Paculla her thanks and went in search of Decia.

Along the way, she stopped to pick up several wine flasks. The group had long since dispensed with heavy barrels that were so common at large gatherings, finding it more preferable to pass bottles around than to bring cups that might serve as evidence for their debauchery. Somehow, the slaves who attended the meetings were able to find a secret and convenient way to dispose of the bottles afterward; there was no evidence. The pleasant smells of cinnamon and thyme also helped to camouflage the smell of wine.

The cave seemed small, full as it was with worshipers and supplicants. Lucilia knew, though, that it was several times the size of her *domus*—possibly much larger. There were candles in brackets mounted directly to the rocky walls of the cavern, and their illumination cast strange shadows because of the unusual surface. As a small child, Lucilia might have been frightened in a room such as this, but at her age, and with the abundance of human bodies and the frequent melodic laughter of women,

Lucilia found it hard to be spooked by a few shadows. Despite the clammy chill that permeated the room, Lucilia found the atmosphere quite cozy. She had found a large pillow within sight of the entrance and had immediately made herself comfortable.

Lucilia spotted Decia immediately when her friend finally did enter through the passageway to the warehouse. Lucilia waved to her friend, brandishing a full flask of wine toward her, already halfway through a bottle of imported Nemean red herself.

Decia walked over to her, though not as enthusiastically as Lucilia might have preferred.

“Where have you been, Sister?” Lucilia asked, embracing Decia, who slowly settled herself onto the pillow beside Lucilia.

“It’s funny you should mention that,” Decia said, running her fingers through her hair, which was unusually tangled.

“I don’t think it’s very funny. The meeting is about to start. I was worried that something had happened to you. Good grief, Deci, what happened to your hair?! It looks like a rat’s nest.”

Decia didn’t meet Lucilia’s eyes when she answered. “Nothing in particular happened. Things did get interesting with your father, though,” she said. “Pass me that flask before you start stumbling around like a fool.”

Lucilia handed Decia the unopened flask, winking at her as she took a pull from the one she’d already been drinking. She watched as Decia pulled the cork out with her teeth, spat it out onto the floor beside her, and drained several inches of wine before setting the flask aside.

“Oh, come on. Tell me what happened. Something obviously did! You look awful,” said Lucilia, brushing a hand through the hair that was matted at the side of her friend’s face, trying to help untangle it. She noticed that there were briars in the knotted parts; those would be a pain to remove without tearing out a lot of hair.

“I went to see your father before I went home, as he asked me to do.”

“Yes, I remember,” said Lucilia. “He was going to send someone with you so that you wouldn’t get into danger on your way home.”

“That’s what he said, yes,” said Decia. She kept taking drinks from the flask she was holding, until finally, it was empty, and even then, she kept trying to drink from it. When nothing came out, she merely frowned, then set it aside for a few seconds before trying again. “But that’s not why. He asked me if I knew anything about the Bacchantes. He wanted to know . . . why I’m around you so much. He thinks you’re keeping something from him.”

Despite her tangled hair, Decia’s face was a mask of cool composure. There were no wrinkles to upset the smooth line of her features, and her mouth remained fixed in something not quite a smile, but not a frown either.

“And what did you tell him?” asked Lucilia, wondering why she didn’t feel more upset by her father’s constant suspicions.

“What I had to,” said Decia. “The truth.”

Lucilia sucked in a sharp breath, but Decia began speaking again before she could be interrupted, “No, not that. You know I would never betray you, though this may seem something of a betrayal to you now. I had to do it, though. It was the only

thing that could convince him that we were both ignorant of the cult . . .” Decia looked Lucilia in the eye and her eyes were fearless and deep and they nearly drowned Lucilia, who wouldn’t look away. “I told him that I love you.”

Lucilia scoffed. “I think he knows that, Deci,” she said.

“He didn’t know the extent,” said Decia. She was silent.

Lucilia was silent for several long minutes, too, until finally she felt the pressure of the quietness overwhelming her, pressing her for words.

“Well, what did he do?” asked Lucilia. Her friend’s disheveled appearance lurking in the back of her mind.

“He didn’t like it,” said Decia. “But I don’t think he can do much about it. I mean, apart from banning me from your *domus* and restricting your activities.”

“Did he do those things, then?” asked Lucilia, hoping her father hadn’t gotten physical with Decia, maybe hit her, like he used to do with Lucilia when he caught her disobeying him.

“No, but . . .” Decia’s voice faltered. She brushed a hand weakly along her collar bone.

Lucilia took Decia’s hand and turned it over. Bringing her palm to her lips, she kissed it. “Decia, what happened to you? Why is your hair matted?” As she spoke, though, Lucilia could see people slipping through the doorway at the back of the cavern.

Decia shook her head and gestured toward the door, draining the rest of her wine in one long pull from the flask. “Let’s not talk about it now. I promise I’ll tell

you more later, but right now, it's not as important as finding out what's going on. Even the servants at home were gossiping about the Senate's decree. They thought I wasn't close enough to hear them, but I heard enough to get the gist of what they were saying."

Lucilia raised an eyebrow at her friend.

"Executions of Bacchantes," Decia whispered.

"Murder, you mean," said Lucilia, watching the people flow through the entrance into the tunnel. "I think it's time."

Decia nodded. Lucilia hurried to get another flask of wine from a nearby table for the two to share, being careful to keep Decia in the corner of her vision so that she would notice if Decia tried to slip away early. When she returned, the two headed arm in arm to the door.

Lucilia and Decia entered the chamber together and found seats in the long rows of benches set up to make the participants comfortable during long preludes in the ceremonies. Lucilia noticed that Decia winced when she sat down; she frowned and getting Decia's attention, raised an eyebrow in question. Decia, though, only shook her head. Lucilia frowned again, looking around to see what the rest of the crowd was doing. She recognized only a few of the people present, but that was usually the case. In a group of several hundred people, the composition tended to change weekly. Some were wearing masks similar to the one she still had stashed in the hood of her cloak, but most were undisguised. The benefit of a mask in such a

group was slight. She figured it helped some people lose themselves in the rites by enabling them to first forget their own identity, but for her and many others, this additional goad was no longer necessary. Lucilia had no difficulty laying aside her worldly concerns to worship and commune with her deity. Near the front of the room, people were beginning to fall silent.

The meeting would be interesting indeed, but more than that, it would be vital for all the members to be aware of what was going on if the cult was going to protect itself from eradication. With the recent actions of the Senate, Lucilia hoped that the head priestess would have insightful advice on what the best course of action was for the individual members. Laying low was obviously a blameless option, but the rites of Bacchus couldn't merely be stopped because of a human institution like the Senate. Lucilia was concerned about what a total cessation of worship would do to the cult and to the god's favor. He wasn't known as a chthonic god for nothing. He was said to have driven people mad at one time for disavowing his existence and potency. She wondered what he would do to his worshippers if they forsook him to escape mortal punishment. If Bacchus understood the concept of human suffering and persecution, did that necessarily justify ceasing to pay religious homage? More than that, though, what would become of all the people the cult helped every day? Many would be left destitute in a society in which there were no such institutions for the public welfare—at least not ones open to free and slave alike, without the requirement of an annual fee. What would happen to the relationships that relied on the cult's gatherings as a means of their continuation? What would happen to her and Decia?

Lucilia's thoughts were interrupted by Paculla Annia approaching the front of the room, her hands in the air waving the gathered Bacchantes into silence. She took her seat on a wooden chair ornately carved with grapes and vine leaves that had been placed on a slightly raised platform. She looked out over the crowd before her.

"Now that we're all here," Paculla said. She paused for a moment, smoothing a strand of dark hair back from her face. "Now that we're all here," Paculla began again. "Well, there are fewer than usual. But I suppose that was to be expected. The Senate's proclamation probably scared many people away from their devotion for the time being. Anyway, now that we're here, let us discuss the matter at hand. I'm sure you've all heard about the Senate's decree by now. In case you haven't, though, they aim to restrict our meetings by requiring us to petition to a senatorial council of no less than one hundred members, limit the size of participants to five, control the social make-up of our assemblies, and prohibit us from holding a common fund. We must do something to combat this. Are we going to just hide like frightened children and let them exterminate us in the name of Roman *mores*? As they did to the matrons all those generations ago? As they were wrongly accused then, we are wrongly accused now. If any one of you wishes to claim that we may in fact be morally, spiritually, or otherwise corrupt, please let that one say so now." Paculla paused for effect, looking around, trying to meet the eye of each individual in turn. When it became apparent that no one was going to support such a ridiculous claim, Paculla continued, "We've always done our best to provide support and nourishment for our members who would be left out to the wolves of Rome if not for our organization. This is larger than any

one of you, larger than myself. We have to defend what we stand for and we should do it here. They've taken away our ability to hold common funds."

The crowd groaned in unison.

"No more burials," said a gravelly voice from the rear of the room. Lucilia turned her head and saw an elderly man, shrunken with age, his arm around an equally elderly woman, who could have been his wife or a lover.

"No more communal dinners," said a plump woman near the front. She looked harmless enough, but Lucilia knew that she was really the wife of a prominent senator. Being married to such a man, Lucilia didn't wonder that she turned to food for comfort.

"No more abortions," said two young girls barely on the cusp of womanhood.

Lucilia didn't know either of the two girls, but the melody of their young voices made her recall Secunda, and consequently, her own youth. At that age, it had been Lucilia's sacred duty to procure the plants that would bring about a rejection of an unborn child. The group of older women in charge of the medical needs of young mothers had explained to her the importance of her job; it wasn't just to allow young women to escape the duty of motherhood, as the patriarchs claimed, but it was one small way in which a woman could have some control over her own body. That didn't even begin to cover the number of women whose health was endangered by childbirth. Then, as now, Lucilia recognized the need for abortive medications as essential. But there was no other reliable way a woman had of ensuring that the herbs were safe enough for her to ingest and potent enough to work; there were many swindlers in the

world who would trick a young girl out of her last *as*, just to cause her death shortly thereafter.

Paculla nodded. “All of this is true,” she said. “But none of it is the most vital harm that their decree will cause. What are we to do with those women who are less fortunate? What of the women whose husbands beat them for sport? What of the women whose husbands demand nothing short of perfection for nothing more than the bare minimum of sustenance necessary for survival? And what sustenance is there if there is no compassion? Sure, you may not starve outright because of the Senate’s actions, but someone will. Chances are good that people whose lives could and would have been improved by our efforts will now starve, suffer abuse, perish, or waste away from maladies. If we cannot maintain a common fund, how will we procure medicine, let alone the apothecaries who research healing herbs and poultices?”

An elderly woman seated on a cushion near Lucilia began weeping. Decia was already gritting her teeth, but now she was firmly clenching Lucilia’s hand as well. Lucilia could hear her friend’s uneven molars as they crunched together, side-to-side. Paculla wasn’t saying anything that most of them hadn’t already heard, but it seemed worse now than it had in the light of day.

“We have to do something,” Paculla continued, “because we can’t just sit here liked frightened sheep and wait for them to take away all of our advantages. Bacchus knows, we need them just to take care of ourselves in this world. We can’t just sit by and wait for the State to give us handouts.”

“The only power we have is here, among our fellows,” said one particularly grubby looking man whose hair was matted to his head in long, dirty strands, the bitterness of his long servitude betraying itself in his harsh tone. “I go home to the farm I tend—the farm of some rich merchant who never even bothers to check in on things unless he wants to collect produce—and no one wants to hear about how people should help each other out. No one cares if his neighbor is starving or beating his wife, or both. I try to tell people there’s a better way, but they scoff. ‘What does a farmer know about philosophy,’ they say. Well the rest of the world might be content to be selfish and ignorant of the suffering of other people, but I don’t want to live that way.”

Several of the other slaves present snorted at the man’s words and shook their heads, some spat and others stomped their feet.

Lucilia felt sorry for the man. He reminded her of Habilis, who was unlike this slave in every respect except for that of servitude. Habilis was more worthy of nobility than most other Romans. He was a fine accountant, had a wealth of knowledge pertaining to the histories and great epics, and his Greek and Latin were quite flawless. It was unfortunate that he had been born into slavery, and would probably die under its yoke. As a young girl, Lucilia had hoped for a day when she would grow to inherit her father’s estate; she would free him and the others, for sure. But the older she got, the more she realized that inheritance would be impossible if she weren’t married. Even then, it would be her husband who inherited, not her. She would have to be married to a man, not un-like her father, who would inherit Lucilius’ estate acting as her guardian, and would not willingly give up so many free slaves. The world was a bad

place for people with Habilis's fate. Nevertheless, Lucilia was glad that he was a house slave, and not an agricultural slave, as the man who had spoken obviously was. Habilis would at least enjoy a relatively long life. He wouldn't work himself to death under a real yoke, and he would never be sent to the mines or conscripted as fodder for the Roman army.

"While I don't deny that it's difficult to change things for the better, is it not better to have the chance to try than to have no free will at all?" asked Paculla, motioning for the crowd, who had become very agitated at the man's words, to settle back into their seats.

"I suppose that's a valid point," said the old slave. "Without the freedoms we have here, most of us would be much worse off. And while no one is necessarily rich because of these connections, many people prosper who would struggle to make ends meet without the connections this group fosters. But that doesn't make me feel any better about my initial concern—what will we do if they exterminate all of us? What will become of society? Of the world?"

By now, people were becoming overeager in their cups. They began clapping raucously and demanded a course of action. Lucilia didn't doubt that, given the opportunity, these people would follow the farmer into battle or real conspiracy. Paculla had better say something to assuage the fears of the crowd. Lucilia didn't want to see what would happen if the anxiety kept building.

Decia was looking particularly glum so Lucilia put an arm around her shoulder. If she didn't have enough to worry about already, it was strange to be taking care of Decia. Usually, Decia was the more composed one.

"What the man says is true for everyone present," said a girl near Lucilia.

"Because of the complex mixture of classes within the cult, many have made invaluable business connections or even partnerships. Others have benefitted through the extensive access to medical care Paculla has worked so hard to provide. Still some, such as the elderly matrons and whores," the girl speaking gestured toward a group of elderly women sitting together in the front row of benches, "shunned by most quarters of Roman society, have derived the majority of their benefits from the warm nature of the company the cult provides. As have we all. And even if some amount of illicit behavior goes on, well, it's only illicit because it's at night and outside of the house. Sure, it would be nothing to be sleeping around with the slaves inside your own home, but take a step outside your *domus* at night and do the same thing and it's suddenly called treason. The fact that if anyone else, say a group of Senators, wanted to have a midnight club that convened to debauch itself and behave contrary to the morals of the ancestors, that would be passed off as extravagance—an Eastern fever, but certainly not a treasonous one. Let a couple of women start a religious organization to help people out, though, and suddenly they're guilty of heinous crimes against the State."

"But it's not all about that," said Lucilia, turning toward the woman who had spoken. She was a middle-aged woman, fair skinned and dark hair. Her eyes were the color of rich soil and she was not smiling. "It's about paternity—lineage. They

wouldn't care so much if it were only men sleeping with slaves. But it's more than that. They don't want women getting pregnant without their husbands' knowledge."

Decia nodded encouragingly at her friend.

"It's about recognizing everyone as equals," Lucilia said. "That wouldn't bode well for the patrician cause. The Senate would scoff at such a notion as impossible, but those of us here know how very real, possible, and beneficial such a belief is. Restricting benefits and opportunities solely on a financial basis is wrong."

"Yes, exactly," said Paculla, smiling with only her lips. "It's about giving people a chance no matter what their birth. It's about respecting an individual for her merit, and not for her father's merit."

The girl who had spoken up nodded and remained silent, but Paculla wasn't going to let the subject go.

"What's your name?" Paculla asked the young woman.

"Fulvia," she said. "I work at the public baths."

"You're passionate, and that will be useful to everyone in the tribulations to come. I admire your strength. But let's not forget the point. We're all humans, rich and poor, and even those of a lower social station think and feel. We're trying to prevent Rome from breaking the human spirit." She looked down at her hands for a moment and then placed them both firmly on her hips and continued speaking, "Every chance each of us has to act according to our inner fire, and not merely according to Roman tradition, is a chance for us to oppose the trend toward sameness—toward submitting

one's desires beneath the desires of those in ultimate power. But who, I ask you, is more powerful than a god? Who is more powerful than Bacchus?"

Everyone was silent, pondering her words.

Throughout all of this, Decia had remained silent. Her shoulders were slack under Lucilia's arm, as though she weren't bothering to hold herself upright anymore. The pallor of her face, too, worried Lucilia. Her friend was generally robust, almost ruddy with youthful exuberance. Tonight, though, she was wan and reserved; she barely reacted to the words being spoken all around her. By the time Paculla called the group back to attention, Decia was trembling.

"Do you feel okay?" Lucilia whispered.

Decia nodded, but failed to meet her friend's gaze.

Lucilia kept her peace, though, knowing that Decia would inevitably confide in her in her own time.

"And what do you propose, *Mater*?" asked Habilis. "We can't exactly revolt; we have no weapons, nor the training to use them. What can we do when the Senate would hunt us into nonexistence? IS hunting us as we speak?"

"We can't very well appeal," Paculla said, grimacing. "Who would defend us? None of us are qualified enough to overturn a senatorial decree. No. I suggest we keep meeting, because there is always strength in numbers; at least, there is more strength in numbers than as individuals. And since the idea of catching the Senate on a day when a hundred of them would actually be present is ludicrous, I think we may as well just ignore the requirement of seeking permission for a meeting of five. Five is

unheard of anyway. What would five do? Sit together and sing hymns? Five isn't even enough to do that very well. No, we will continue as we have been. We will stick together. We'll keep an eye out for spies and people unfamiliar to us. We'll have to be especially careful not to talk about anything involving the cult in front of the uninitiated. Even if this doesn't blow over, at least this way no one will have to be the scapegoat. They will catch us all or they will get none of us."

The crowd snickered at her last statement, but it was a snicker filled with uneasiness and foreboding. The entire situation was just one large case of finding an appropriate scapegoat and blaming it for the elevated crime rate in Rome over the past few years. Lucilia remembered Ulpus saying at dinner that a foolish courtesan had thought she could curry favor with her betrothed if she told him tall tales about the Bacchantes. She had to admit, though, that the cult's typical activities would be more than enough to raise the eyebrows of the aging Senators, many of whom were becoming increasingly concerned with their wives' fidelity in their waning years and with the increasing prevalence of so-called Eastern customs. To continue their legacies, the Senators needed heirs, and they needed those heirs to be, without a doubt, from their own stock.

"Does anyone object to the plan to continue as we are and not give the Senate any quarter?" Paculla asked.

Paculla waited for several minutes while people spoke in hushed voices about their options or waited for the decision to be decided for them.

Finally, Decia spoke up. “But maybe everyone should know exactly what is at stake,” she said. She looked around at all the young girls, the elderly women, the slaves, who were almost helpless in a society in which land and money bought everything, including freedom and life.

“You’re right, dear.” Paculla ran the back of her hand across her forehead. “I’m afraid what the Senate is threatening to do as punishment is very unpleasant,” she said. “They want us to turn ourselves in, at which point we will be subjected to a family tribunal, or if that is not possible, we will be tried by a group of magistrates appointed by the Senate.”

“The consequences of these trials being . . .” prompted Decia.

“Well, should any one of us be found guilty of conspiracy with the cult, she or he would be executed,” Paculla said, lowering her voice.

The crowd was silent.

“Is there no talk of banishment?” asked her younger son, Minius. He was short so he had to stand to be noticed. His hair was surprisingly reddish in tint and Lucilia wondered if he wasn’t from one of the eastern colonies himself.

“None,” said Paculla.

The group fell to hushed, frantic whisperings.

“We will have to all stick together,” said Maria, a middle-aged woman who was seated near Lucilia. Lucilia could see that she was nervously bunching the folds of her *palla*.

“Exactly. Is that settled then?” asked Paculla. “If you wish to leave Rome, as some of our sisters and brothers already have, please let me know and it will be arranged for you. We shouldn’t all go at once, though; that would draw suspicion to us.”

Lucilia was among the loudest of those championing cohesion among the group. Most of the crowd signified assent along with her, but several people said nothing, nodding only faintly—if at all.

“None of this would have ever happened under the last priestess,” said a wizened old woman, struggling to rise to her feet. “She would never have profaned our sacred rites by inviting them,” she paused to cast a scathing look at Paculla’s two sons, “into our midst. It’s abhorrent that such a youngling as you would put us all at risk through her recklessness,” the old woman said, spitting on the floor nearby.

Paculla looked thunderstruck. Lucilia wondered what she would say to the charge. Everyone knew that it was true that the cult would never have become a target for the Senate if men and women didn’t mingle so freely through the rites.

Paculla visibly composed herself before saying, “So you think it’s not the right of anyone—male or female—to worship our god?”

The old woman chuckled. “Young one, Bacchus has female worshippers for a reason. Allowing men to take the sacred rites is a corruption. It’s not about what they should or shouldn’t be allowed to do. Let them come to meetings—fine! But you shouldn’t have allowed them to participate in the mysteries. Not only does it go against Roman mores, but it also goes against the tradition of the cult and the wishes

of our deity. You, and those who would follow you, deserve the Senate's correction!"

The old woman marched slowly but firmly from the room, then. Never once looking over her shoulder.

Paculla sank back onto the chair behind her, putting her chin on her hand.

"Don't listen to her, Mother," Lucilia heard Minius say. "She's just bitter at how much things have changed since she was a girl. But times are always changing. She'll have to learn to deal with it."

If Paculla said anything to him, Lucilia didn't hear it. The next thing she knew, Paculla was rising. She gestured everyone back into the larger part of the cavern for the *supplicatio* and thanksgiving ceremonies. Lucilia tugged on Decia's sleeve and the two rose together, heading for the door.

Stories were told in Rome, of course, about Pentheus*, and how his mother and aunt had torn him limb from limb in a blind rage urged on by Bacchus' fury. The stories described how they had howled like beasts, and thinking him to be some sort of wild lion, they ripped apart his flesh and devoured him raw. It was only later that they realized what they had done, and when they finally came to see what had happened, they were grief-stricken for their error in judgment.

But those are just stories, *fabulae*, told to small children to scare them away from erratic behavior and from drinking once they got older. Lucilia knew that this situation wasn't like that. This was more like an ecstasy of love and fellow feeling. And after all, she thought, wasn't Pentheus being punished for something anyway?

Weren't his female relatives being punished for their disavowal of the god's divinity? Lucilia worshipped Bacchus because the rites, the methods of his worship, strengthened her against the sea of strict expectations for her behavior and conduct that rained down upon her from all sides during the day; not one single day went by where she wasn't subjected to some form of moral lesson, even if it was only her father's criticizing appraisal of her hobbies.

One by one, the Bacchantes entered and took up evenly-spaced positions across the floor of the empty cavern, seating themselves on the ground. By the light of four braziers placed in the corners of the cave, the women unpinned their hair, letting it fall in loose tresses around their shoulders. The men drank from flagons and stretched their muscles. People took care to sit well away from the edges of the room, which were shrouded by long, hanging lengths of gauzy linen. Later, these cloths would provide privacy for some of the Bacchantes who chose to utilize the revel as a means of coupling, and who cared about not being seen at this, even by their fellow Bacchantes. Lucilia made sure to take a place near to Decia in the middle of the floor. Paculla Annia was the last to be seated; this time, she was toward the rear of the crowd. No one would lead mortals before Bacchus. Once she had seated herself and unbound her own hair, the ceremony commenced.

They began by chanting a plea to Bacchus to hear their voices and help them in their plight against the Senate. Since the Senate and Bacchus were so obviously proponents of polar causes, Lucilia saw little reason to doubt that his aid was assured in the coming tribulations. After the third chant, which was a thanksgiving to Bacchus

for his gift to the world, the vine from which grapes were harvested, they rose and burst into a raucous song.

It was during this song that things became different. The four braziers in the corners of the room began to blaze up higher than mere oil would have facilitated. The air shimmered with a golden haze. Lucilia could hear the pounding of tympani, but there were none in the room. She glanced to her left at Decia, who was stretching her legs, but not smiling as she usually did.

“Are you sure you won’t tell me what happened?” Lucilia asked again, placing her hands firmly on Decia’s shoulders.

“Nothing happened,” said Decia. “Hush. You’re going to disrupt the ceremony.”

Lucilia didn’t say anything else for a long time, letting herself become immersed in the regular beating of drums and the warmth that was slowly creepy from her belly to her head. It was soothing. She absorbed her mind in the moment of the dance, blocking out all other thoughts or concerns. She slowly rose to her feet, feeling her body fall into unison with the drumbeat, her hips swaying, gently at first, to the rhythm—it felt as if it were happening to someone else, the sensation was so distant and indistinct.

“Lucilia.” The air seemed to crash with her name, like a wave breaking over rocks.

“Lucilia,” she heard again, clearer yet quieter.

She glanced around, but no one seemed to be talking to her. No one was even looking at her. All around, bodies were twisting and whirling in patterns almost too intricate to be possible. One girl was dancing so close to the floor that Lucilia had trouble imagining how long it had taken the girl to gain such flexibility. Another, a man, was spinning a young woman in circles, catching her around the waist and rotating her direction every few turns. She saw Decia a few yards away, but she was absorbed in a sinuous dance of curves and winding movement. She looked like wind blowing leaves through the air, or storm cloud roiling in an evening sky.

“Lucilia.”

There! That time it was more distinct. It had to be someone’s voice, but still, no one was nearby or looking in her direction.

“Pay attention,” said a voice, at once gravelly and soft. “You must not worry about things that have not yet come to pass. You have no control over them. You have control only of your own portion of the present. You must not let fear of the future distract you from what is important to you.”

Lucilia glanced around to see if anyone else appeared to have heard this voice, but when she saw no one distracted from the dancing and celebration, she cocked her head to one side and made up her mind to listen.

“Then what can I do?” she asked, keeping her voice low so as not to draw attention to herself.

There were several minutes of silence, during which time Lucilia worried that the voice had gone for good. What if she had hallucinated it in the first place?

“Nothing,” the voice finally said. Lucilia thought it sounded sadder than before. “Hold fast in your faith and perpetuate my worship.”

“How?” Lucilia asked, half embarrassed to be ostensibly talking to herself.

“Drink me and be strengthened,” the voice said, sounding very distant and far away.

“Bacchus?” asked Lucilia, unable to comprehend the nature of the disembodied voice.

There was no reply, though. And after awhile, Lucilia stopped listening for one. She looked around and saw the sea of bodies around her, seemingly unperturbed by the voice. Decia was still twisting her body in intricate patterns.

Paculla clapped her hands loudly for attention. The rituals of purification would begin, rendering the worshipers fit for an audience with the god, should he so chose. In front of the makeshift wooden altar, Paculla first broke a loaf of bread over a *liknon*, the winnowing basket that would serve to invoke infant Bacchus, who was said to have been protected from Hera’s anger in a cradle of similar appearance. Then she lit a torch from a large brazier and thrust the torch into the basket. A large shower of sparkling, shimmering lights in a variety of unnatural colors burst forth into the air. This was taken as a good omen—the rituals were favorable. Unable to complete the proper ceremony for purification by air, due to their change of ritual locations, Paculla would have to skip over that portion, hoping that no ill-will of the god would be obtained because of it.

Upon culmination of the rites that would ensure Bacchus' attentiveness to their worship, people began waving their *thyrsi* around in elaborate gestures. But soon these fluid motions became erratic punching movements more like those of gladiators than of dancers when the drumbeats increased in tempo. They were still passing around wine, but instead of casual, slow pulls from the flask, people were now gulping more than they had a tolerance for. As the wine took effect, people were suddenly whirling in complete disorder, bumping into each other and yelling in ecstasy . . . or frustration, and in the confusion, Lucilia lost sight of Decia.

Despite the commotion going on all around her, Lucilia went in search of her friend. She considered the possibility of Decia having left already, but dismissed that as unlikely—she knew that Decia waited for these parties all week. Decia loved few things more than dancing with her hair down and spending time with Lucilia in a place in which neither woman was held to the standards of polite Roman society.

She saw many women who could have been her friend from one angle, but when they turned or Lucilia got closer, were obviously not Decia. In a room of more than two hundred people, there were people of all different appearances and stations in life. Lucilia approached one woman, who had seemed a likely candidate from behind, but then the woman turned around and Lucilia realized that she had green eyes, not blue. The woman who wasn't Decia smiled invitingly at Lucilia, extending both her hands, but Lucilia turned away. She passed people she knew, such as Verticordia, the butcher's wife, who lived in the slums outside of the market district, and her husband, Lucius.

She saw Paculla, who was in a corner with a young, muscular man. She couldn't see his face, but didn't think that she knew him; he had blonde hair and was very tall. Paculla's laughter rang throughout the room, and Lucilia could guess what the two were doing. Minius and Herennius Cerrinius, on the other hand, were talking animatedly with the two young girls who had spoken up about the loss of abortions during the meeting. Lucilia passed them near enough to catch the last snatch of what they were saying. "I'm sure Mother won't mind. She did offer," said Minius. But then Lucilia was beyond them.

Many people were passionately embracing one another. Some of them were obviously couples, while others seemed merely to need human connection. She saw the girl from the baths, Fulvia, with a young man, dancing with the passion of the Furies. And several of the older matrons were gliding around from Bacchant to Bacchant, exchanging jovial greetings and embraces. Others had already betaken themselves behind the curtains and their silhouettes could be seen frantically grasping at men or women. One attractive man approached her, motioning for her to join him in a dance. He ran his hands through his thick brown hair and smiled at her, but she declined, feigning disinterestedness. Making sure that Decia was all right was her first priority.

Lucilia recognized Habilis in the commotion. The woman with whom he was dancing, for a brief moment, looked for all the world like her own mother. The mask she was wearing obscured her most prominent facial features, but the shape of her body, her hair, and her shoes were similar. She dismissed the thought as ridiculous;

her mother would never participate in something like this, would never be an adulterer, and would never have the courage to go against her husband's wishes or the Senate's decrees. She met the gaze of the woman before continuing on her search. No, it couldn't have been her mother.

Then she spotted Decia, who was sitting on a large pillow alone in a niche in the wall with an empty flask on the floor to one side.

Lucilia approached her friend cautiously. She must have taken the wine flask with her when she had gone off from Lucilia, but Lucilia hadn't noticed its loss in her anxiety to find her friend.

"Are you okay?" Lucilia asked her, sitting down next to her on the cushion.

"Sure," said Decia. She met Lucilia's gaze and smiled. "You're very pretty when you frown like that," she said. "But you can stop now. I'm really all right."

Lucilia laughed, but she did not believe her friend. Decia had managed to smooth most of the tangles out of her hair by now, but her eyes were very bright and moist and the tip of her nose was slightly red, as if from crying.

"It's all fine. You said so yourself," said Lucilia, cradling Decia's head between her palms and putting her forehead against Decia's.

Decia raised her eyes to meet Lucilia's. Lucilia smiled and kissed her friend on the forehead, the bridge of her nose, her cheek, and then she brushed her lips against Decia's. Then they were kissing and although Lucilia could taste Decia's salty tears as they ran from her eyes, she did not relinquish her lips. Decia hugged her fiercely, and Lucilia returned the force of the embrace, wanting to know what was wrong only less

than she wanted to be closer to Decia. She thought, not for the first time, that Decia was more drug than the wine, her scent more intoxicating, her taste more liberating. Lucilia forgot where her lips ended and Decia's began. The cacophonous sounds of the revelers faded away until all Lucilia could hear were Decia's gasping breaths. She lost track of which heartbeats were her own and which belonged to Decia, rhythmic and deafening.

"Let's go away," Decia whispered, pressing her lips against Lucilia's ear.

"We can't. You know I want to but we can't," said Lucilia, running a hand through Decia's hair, feeling the silkiness and thickness of the long tresses.

"Yes we can," Decia insisted. "You heard Paculla as well as I did. Let's tell her we want to go away. Let's leave tonight." Decia pulled away just enough to lock gazes with Lucilia. Her eyes were very large and bright.

Lucilia felt her back warming under Decia's strong hands. She smiled as Decia tugged at the hem of her *stola*. The braziers were burning lower than before; eventually, they would completely extinguish themselves, signaling the arrival of daytime. A vaguely foreboding sensation lurked in the back of Lucilia's mind at the thought of the day to come. She lay back and let the gentle caress of Decia's lips on her thigh fill her with a warm sensation that threatened to overwhelm her, let Decia's softness cushion her against her cares, let the moistness of her tongue wash away her worries.

4

Day 2: Just before dawn

Some hours later, Lucilia was stretched out on a large pillow next to Decia, whose chest was rising and falling evenly with her even breathing. The room was completely dark, but more or less silent, with only an occasional moan or gasp issuing from somewhere in the room. At some point, the already dim lights had extinguished themselves. There was no light now except for the infrequent glint of a candle that was still sputtering in its holder. Lucilia knew the floor was strewn with empty wine flasks, even if she couldn't make out the clutter in the darkness. Lucilia herself was lying close to Decia, one of her hands draped over Decia's bare abdomen.

Lucilia knew that in another hour or two, the sun would rise and she would have to be back in her *domus* or risk being found out. Decia's frantic exhortation came back to her then. Had she been serious? Run away? Them? Lucilia's practical nature took over: what money would they use for such a venture? Where would they go? She wished that Decia were awake. Decia would know these things. But she dared not wake her yet. She still didn't know exactly what had happened to affect Decia's appearance so, but it must have been unpleasant. She wouldn't be the one to wake her from the slumber that concealed the effects of whatever ordeal she had been through. If, for a few hours, Decia could be happy and ignorant, Lucilia would give her at least that much.

Lucilia rolled over onto her side and cradled Decia, smelling the cinnabar scent of her hair and feeling the soft curve of Decia's back pressed against her chest. Thus, she lay in the darkness. For as long as she could bear it, she listened to the breathing of her lover and thought about what life would be like if they did leave. There would be no Ulpus, which seemed like a positive thing, but then, he had always been decently polite to her and she wasn't convinced it was fair to just leave without saying anything to him. But there would also be no Senate hunting them down if they left the Roman territories in their attempt to be far enough away from the investigation. There would also be no father and no mother, though. She had never been away from them for more than a few days. How would she manage? But then, she knew that Decia was capable and independent. Perhaps it would be possible. Money could be obtained, through distant relatives or working. She figured finding a distant cousin from whom she could borrow enough *denarii** to get by for a few years wouldn't be too difficult; she could probably even convince him not to tell her father, if she petitioned someone on her mother's side of the family. If it came to it, she and Decia could mend clothing or weave fabric for a few coins here and there. It wouldn't be a rich life, but perhaps it would be preferable to the cage she found herself in lately. There were many places where two women on their own wouldn't raise eyebrows in suspicion, such as the newly colonized Hispania or more reliable settlements closer to home such as Campania, though the thought of staying that nearby made her nervous. The very idea of this sort of freedom was intoxicating in and of itself. Every generation, it seemed many women were being widowed at an earlier age. Rome's increasing presence in

the world was not without cost. The recent wars with Macedonia alone had cost many valuable Roman lives, not to mention the campaign in Hispanica. She and Decia wouldn't be alone, being out from under the *manus** of their fathers and prospective husbands, if and when they came along.

When she could lie motionless no longer, she massaged Decia's shoulders, gently waking her from slumber.

"Should we go talk to Paculla?" asked Decia, sitting up and yawning.

"I'm worried about it, but if you think we can make it on our own, I'm willing to try. Every option we have now is dangerous," said Lucilia, leaning over and kissing Decia on the neck.

"I'm worried, too, but I don't really see what other option we have now. At least if we try to go away, our deaths won't be assured."

Lucilia found her clothes and slipped them on over her head, straightening the *palla* as she stood.

"Okay, then. We'll go talk to her," said Lucilia.

Decia beamed, flinging herself bodily on Lucilia, knocking them both back to the floor. They spent several moments there, kissing and happy, before Decia rose and began to dress.

When both women were fully clothed, they shared another brief kiss before heading in search of Paculla Annia.

Sunlight was shining dimly from somewhere high above them, perhaps from a crevasse in the mountainside. The light was a welcome change, banishing the strange

shadows from the night before. The cavern was clammy, but Lucilia suspected that there was nothing to do about that when one was so far underground. Many of the others were beginning to stir, but there was no rush to their actions yet. Lucilia waved at several young women, whom she recognized from the baths as Spuria and Lepida. She was glad that Decia looked more in charge of herself than she had the night before. The customary spring had returned to Decia's gait and she was clearly aware of her surroundings.

"Come on, Deci," Lucilia said. "Won't you just tell me what happened to you last night? I already know it involves my father."

Decia looked down at the ground, shaking her head. "No," she said. "I can't. I promise I will soon, but not right now. Let's just get everything arranged so we can get out of here safely. Then once we're not in danger, I'll tell you. Please?"

Lucilia stared hard at her friend. "Deci," she said. "You can trust me."

"I know," said Decia. "I'm just not ready to talk about it yet. Don't worry. I'm fine. It was just a shock. That's all."

"Okay, but soon. You promised," Lucilia said. After a few minutes, they were nearing the area where they knew Paculla would be. Lucilia spoke again, "You don't think he'll hurt me, do you?"

Decia just shook her head.

Lucilia gritted her teeth, wondering what Lucilius could have done to scare Decia so much. But she didn't ask her again about what had happened the night before. Decia had said she would confide in her eventually. Didn't she always?

Paculla Annia greeted the two women fondly from a large adjoining room that was sumptuously decorated with images of Bacchus, mattresses, bedding, and a plenitude of candles and incense. Paculla was smiling and hugged each woman in turn. Despite the evening's revels, she was mostly composed, with the noticeable exception of deep, dark circles beneath her otherwise bright and shining azure eyes. Lucilia wondered if the priestess had even slept at all. Decia was looking around them to see if there were anyone within hearing range. Although it was still quite dim, there was enough light to make out forms, even though details and features were as yet hidden under the mask of gloom.

"You were going to talk to me about the situation with Ulpius?" Paculla prompted, taking Lucilia's hand in her own and rubbing it affectionately.

"I was going to," said Lucilia. "But considering the decree, Ulpius may not be the highest priority right now."

"Actually," said Decia, "we were thinking that it might be best if we left. Under the present circumstances and all, it seems like the best option."

"We're not sure where to go," added Lucilia, "but we'd prefer a place where we won't stand out—where we can live in relative peace and quiet with no suspicious agents looking for us."

Paculla looked at the two women. Her smile had subsided, and now her eyes looked even older as she wrinkled her brow.

"Have you girls seriously considered the dangers such an undertaking presents?" Paculla asked, frowning at Decia. "And I don't just mean from the Roman

Senate. It's well and good that you want to be away from what may turn out to be certain death, but throwing yourselves into uncertain circumstances that may very well include slavery and prostitution may not necessarily be the best way to handle the situation." Paculla paused and stared off into the murkiness for some seconds. "I can give you some money, of course, but there isn't as much to spare for such an undertaking as I would wish. What will you do when you run out of money?"

"We thought we might find jobs," said Decia. "You know we don't mind an honest day's work. Any anyway, anything is better than being caught and executed."

"Yes," said Lucilia. "Who knows? It might even be fun to support ourselves for once."

"You have a point there," said Paculla. "I still have that beautiful tapestry of Bacchus and the nymphs that you girls made for me when you were still youngsters. Though I imagine you're considerably better by now." She smiled kindly at them. Lucilia hoped she didn't start crying. Paculla was sentimental. "And it is always better to take care of yourself than to have to rely on someone else for your very sustenance," she continued, "But what about your families? I assume you at least will tell yours, Decia?"

"Actually, we weren't planning on telling them," Lucilia said.

"So you aren't even going to tell Ulpus then?" asked Paculla. "He's smitten with you, you know. It's one thing that you don't want to marry him, but if you don't let anyone know what you're doing, you may very well cause a lot of trouble, especially if he gets the idea that you're in some sort of danger."

“But I am in some sort of danger! We are all in danger,” said Lucilia. “What if he comes after me anyway? Or tells the Senate? Or tries to prevent me from leaving because he doesn’t understand the importance of my religious vows or the seriousness of the Consul?”

“Calm down, dear,” said Paculla, cupping a palm under Lucilia’s chin. “It will avail you nothing to get worked up right now. I will see what I can do for the two of you. I was just suggesting that Ulpius might want to know that you’re okay. You could always send him an anonymous letter once you’re safely reestablished somewhere. Decia, think about what I said to you. It’s not fair to just run off and not say anything at all to your family.”

“I’m not convinced we’ll really get to just leave,” Lucilia said. “If we’re found out, I, at least, will be forced to return home, where I’m sure Ulpius will still be lying in wait to marry me. You can’t possibly think my father would willingly let his most valuable possession just walk away from what I’m sure he looks at as a profitable business arrangement.”

“Is that really such a bad alternative, though, dear?” asked Paculla. “A lot of women have much worse suitors. You don’t have to love him just because you marry him.”

“Don’t I? You’d have me end up like my mother then.” Lucilia shifted her weight from foot to foot, anxious to be done with the conversation.

“You shouldn’t talk about your mother that way,” said Paculla. “She can’t do anything to change the past now. And at the time, she didn’t have any option but to

marry Sextus. I'm merely pointing out that at least you have a family likely to take you back even if you stray this once. A lot of women aren't so lucky and would be cast out of their fathers' household for such disobedience. At least you know that Ulpus would love you."

"In a way, she's right," said Decia. "He always listens patiently while you speak. He's unlike your father in almost every respect. He doesn't outright dismiss everything you say merely because you're a woman. I do disagree with you, though, Paculla. He's a member of the Senate. You can't honestly think that he would choose to support his soon-to-be-bride whom he barely knows against the wishes of the group who's fostered his political rise for four or five years now."

"Really, that's one of the biggest problems with the match," said Lucilia.

"I see," said Paculla. "You don't think it would be easy to deceive him? Even just about your religious affiliations?"

"It's not that," said Lucilia. "I don't want to live that way—to have to lie about my every move and desire just to be accepted by some man I don't particularly like anyway. And say I did manage to pull it off; he would have no idea what I was really doing so many nights. If he found out, no matter how, don't you think he'd be more than a little irate?"

"Much more," Paculla agreed.

"And then there's Decia," said Lucilia, giving Decia's arm a fond squeeze.

"I'm not trying to talk you out of this," Paculla said. "I just want you to consider both sides of the situation. It's not as simple as saying Ulpus is bad and we

are good. You have to consider his merits as well. And I do think you have to at least tell him once you're safely hidden far away."

Lucilia shook her head, but Decia was nodding hers in assent. "I agree," Decia said. "It isn't fair not to tell him. What if the situation were reversed, and you were running off with him and contemplating not even telling me? I would want to know that you were safe at least. Otherwise, I imagine I'd go mad worrying about what had become of you."

"Fine," said Lucilia. "But just so you know, I think it would be better if he didn't know."

"Well, humor us," said Paculla. "Now, give me some time to get things sorted out. Don't do anything rash. You'll hear from me as soon as I make the arrangements. And, girls," Paculla said, "take care. I love you both."

"Thank you, Mother," said Decia, hugging the older woman.

"You could send word with your daughter when you figure something out; I invited her over to weave with us later this morning," said Lucilia.

Paculla let out a short gasp.

"You what?" she demanded, taking a step closer to Lucilia.

"She seemed very nice. I thought she might benefit from Decia's tutelage," said Lucilia.

"And if I had a daughter here, I would appreciate that very much," said Paculla, frowning at the two women.

“By the gods,” said Decia, looking around in the lightening room. “We have to get out of here—all of us—now.”

“What good would that do?” snapped Paculla. “We’ve been found out.”

“But we can’t know what her intentions were in telling me that she was your daughter,” said Lucilia. “She couldn’t have been more than twelve years of age. Surely, such a young girl wouldn’t be put to work as a spy. I didn’t even question her, she was so young. Although, I did think it strange that after all these years I wouldn’t know about all your children”

“Wouldn’t that be the best sort of spy anyway?” asked Decia. “One young enough to deflect suspicion. We’d better go, Lucilia.”

“What about everyone else? They have to be warned,” said Lucilia. People were now up and moving around, although they were certainly taking their time.

“There isn’t time for that!” Decia said, tugging on Lucilia’s arm.

Lucilia looked to Paculla, hoping that she would agree with her and not Decia.

“She’s right, you know,” said Paculla. “You must go. I will take care of things here. I’ll try to take care of the other thing, too. I will send word as soon as I can. Be patient and discreet until you hear from me. Don’t do anything rash!”

“I’m sorry,” said Lucilia as Decia dragged her toward the exit. “I should have known!”

The tunnel through which they left the cavern was much narrower and hidden away in an alcove in one corner of the vast cavern. It would take them, by means of

the secret tunnels that connected to the aqueducts, to their individual homes without detection. Lucilia hoped it was still secure.

“Do you think these tunnels seem darker than usual?” Lucilia asked after a few moments of traveling in tense silence. Every few paces, she torqued her upper body to look behind them, making sure the passageway was still vacant.

“No,” said Decia. “And anyway, in another half hour or so, the passageway will start filling with other Bacchantes.”

Lucilia noticed, though, that she cast a glance over her shoulder anyway.

“That’s what I’m worried about,” said Lucilia.

“Quit thinking about it. You can’t do anything about it even if there were someone waiting here to ambush us.” Decia reached out for Lucilia’s hand, willing to offer the reassurance of her own confidence in what she said.

Lucilia took her hand.

“Where would you like to go after this,” asked Decia, “after we find a way to leave?”

“Maybe we should try to keep our heads down here,” said Lucilia. “We could just leave the neighborhood. Rome is a large city; there’s a good chance that we can be safe and live relatively normal lives if we can just get away from the people who know us. At least, we know how to make money here if we have to.” She was thinking none too enthusiastically about the droves of slave women that populated the brothels in the *urbs*. Some of them were voluntarily working the job, but most of them, and almost all of the foreigners, had been conscripted against their will and forced into it to repay

some debt they had never actually incurred. It was awful, the things that could happen to someone who was without status and unable to communicate effectively or defend herself. But she wondered if the very profession itself couldn't somehow be turned to the advantage of a female entrepreneur.

"I agree with you in principle," said Decia. "It's better to stick to places where the danger will be apparent to us, than to become lost in a sea of foreigners with no ties and no way of controlling our situation. Perhaps we should just try to find some obscure corner of the city to relocate to."

"I don't think that's very practical," said Lucilia. "How could we ever feel safe in the middle of a persecution? And we definitely couldn't continue to practice our rites here."

"You have a point," said Decia. "The rites are what really matter."

After a few more minutes, the two reached their exit. The tunnels branched off in the direction of all the major areas in the city, so that the members would have no difficulty whatsoever reaching their domiciles undetected. The women emerged from what appeared to be a large grain cistern.

"You'll still come over this morning, as we had planned?" Lucilia asked.

Decia didn't meet her eyes, looking everywhere else instead.

"What's wrong?" Lucilia asked. "Even if Secunda was a spy, she can't possibly know where I live. We were supposed to send for her, remember?"

Decia nodded. "I remember, but she could have asked around. And anyway, her job would merely be to get names. I doubt she was actually planning on confronting us herself."

"So? Will you still come over? I doubt my father will be home before supper, so you don't have to worry about that."

"I don't know. Maybe. We will see. I have a lot of things I have to get done before we leave," said Decia.

"Oh, come on, we don't even have a plan yet. You can't possibly be worried about settling your affairs when we aren't even sure this will all happen."

Decia still wouldn't meet her gaze. Lucilia moved to stand directly in front of her, but Decia looked away, avoiding eye contact. Lucilia took her chin in one hand and gently tipped her friend's head up so that their eyes were directly in line.

"Tell me what's wrong with you," she said, smoothing Decia's hair with her other hand.

"I can't," said Decia.

Lucilia saw tears forming in the other woman's eyes. She couldn't imagine what had happened to upset her so the night before.

"Come on now, we have to get going. Just tell me. I'm not going to be upset with you."

"No," Decia said. "I don't want you to be upset with anyone."

"What does that mean?" asked Lucilia, taking her hand away from Decia's face.

“I just think it’s a better idea if I’m not around your father today,” she said.

“Actually, maybe for a while. If he goes out, send word and I will come to see you.”

Lucilia just frowned. She couldn’t imagine what had happened to evince such a reaction from Decia. They had never gotten along, her father and Decia, but she hardly thought that was a reason to avoid him. Decia was always so outspoken and confident that Lucilia knew her father couldn’t have hurt her feelings. He was a blowhard and they both knew that about him; he was all talk and no action.

Before she could say a word in parting, Decia had already swung on her heel and was heading quickly down the street in the direction of her own home.

The sun had barely crested the horizon and the air was filled with a clammy mist. People were already starting to appear on the streets: food vendors, merchants, and wives on missions to procure food for their households. She would have to hurry or the cook would catch her coming in.

5

Day 2: Early morning

Lucilia walked through the entranceway of her *domus*, head bowed as much in weariness as in thought. Ought she to go visit Decia and try again to ascertain what was wrong with her? Obviously, she was not okay. Her self-assurance seemed to have been compromised: she had not been as decisive as she usually was during their meeting with Paculla. Lucilia couldn't imagine what had made Decia so unsure of herself; her typically towering confidence had been shaken. What could cause such a thing, though?

“Where have you been?”

Lucilia stopped short, looking up to see her father glaring at her. He was standing just inside the atrium, his arms folded across his chest. He was already dressed in his daily attire: a short toga that came to just above his knees and had a verdigris border along the hem along with a pair of finely tooled leather sandals that he laced halfway up his calves; the weather was starting to become warm, and he had already stowed away his thick, winter boots.

“Just . . . out for a walk,” said Lucilia. Her father didn't usually rise so early. And when he did, it was always because he had important business to attend elsewhere—he didn't just lurk around the *domus*. He was the last person she had imagined encountering. “I've not been sleeping well lately. I thought some fresh air might help.”

She started to resume her walk down the hallway, but he halted her again, this time with his outstretched arm.

“There are certain things,” he began, running his free hand through his close-cropped hair, but not taking his arm from Lucilia’s shoulder. “There are certain things that one tends to overlook in a girl, things that simply can’t be overlooked in a wife. Do you understand?”

“What sort of things, Father?” she asked. “Wearing a toga? Playing at athletic competitions with boys?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, girl. You may well have fooled your mother, but she’s not in a position to help you in this.”

Lucilia jerked her shoulder out of his grasp.

“Why don’t you tell me what it is you think I’ve done,” she said, clipping the ends of the words short, as she had heard Decia do countless times in anger.

“That! You mimic her to antagonize me. You emulate her,” Lucilius said.

“Who?” asked Lucilia, letting the anger drop from her voice to be replaced by bemused confusion.

“That shameless wench you’re always bringing around. Decia,” he said.

“Father, that’s no way to talk about a young woman—aristocratic or plebeian or anything else.”

“You’re right,” Lucilius said, growling in the back of his throat as he spat the word out like so much used up garbage. “Do tell me, how am I to address the person who is going to single-handedly ruin your chance at a good match?”

For the first time in her life, Lucilia wished that she had gotten more sleep the night before. She wasn't prepared for this sort of onslaught, not so early, and not so unexpectedly.

"Ulpus is the best suitor you've managed to attract," her father continued. "And you're just going to give him up because of some sort of girlish lark. How foolish can you be?"

"Did you ever consider that it might be you who's causing me to have problems making a match?" Lucilia asked. "That your stinginess has limited my prospects anyway? If you ever, even just once, thought about anyone but yourself, you would be able to see how unhappy I am with the sort of men you're always choosing for me—men who would settle for a minimal dowry because of my perceived attractiveness, with no thought at all for what would become of me if they should die before their time. And you stand there, expecting me to just let you ambush me like this, like you always do, accusing me of gods-know-what sort of crimes you yourself can never even manage to articulate. Well, I'm not going to do it anymore; I'm not going to back down and let you tell me what's best for me when you don't even know what's best for yourself. Carousing with mistresses at all hours and ruining my mother's life. It's un-Roman. You'll never know anything of what matters to me. Even if I told you, you wouldn't think it was important. All you care about is your career. And that's what this is, isn't it? My so-called 'match' with Ulpus? It's just another of your schemes to gain support among the senators so you'll have a semblance of a chance in your stupid election. It's shameful that you even dare to claim the match is

to make me content. The mere notion that you could ever know what's best for me, that you could possibly bring about my happiness by placing me in a situation so like my mother's, is absurd." As soon as she finished speaking, Lucilia burst into uncontrollable giggles.

All the while, Lucilius stood there, looking on with eyes that did not soften. He didn't look particularly shocked, but he must have been because he never interrupted her tirade, even to protest that what she said was untrue. "Did you even sleep last night?" he asked. "You're hysterical."

Lucilia just glared at him. She could feel her eyelids sticking to her eyes; she knew they must be bloodshot. "I slept enough," she said.

"Women," Lucilius called across the atrium. "Now, when one of the slaves comes to escort you to your room, you will go silently and calmly and wait there until you are summoned. If I so much as hear a whisper of gossip that indicates you have left your room, you will be sorry. You're not to contact that woman again. From now on, your attentions will be spent in convincing Ulpius that his decision was the correct one; remember, until the ceremony happens, he can always back out. And if he backs out, you will be sorry. If you can't be reasonable, I will have to take matters into my own hands. In a way, I already have."

Lucilia stood there, smiling a foolish grin but unable to order her face despite her best attempts to regain composure.

Two of the slave women appeared around the corner from the direction of the slave quarters. They were bundled in their bed sheets, and Lucilia suspected that these were two who weren't usually called upon in the daytime.

"Yes?" asked the shorter of the two, a dark-haired Gaul with poor Latin who had only recently appeared in the household. Lucilia didn't know her name or what exactly her duties were, but she could guess; the girl was attractive and couldn't have been more than sixteen.

The taller one looked Roman enough, but with a strange cant to her eyes that suggested Eastern blood in her lineage; it was no wonder she had ended up a slave. Not much was known about the eastern kingdoms, but the general superstition was that they were all some sort of magical demons who possessed prophetic powers that rivaled even those of the seers and augurs typical in Rome.

"Escort my daughter to her chamber," said Lucilius, smiling a toothy grin at the two slaves. "She seems to be disoriented. I found her wandering out here. Maybe she's sleep-walking again. You know, she used to do that when she was a babe."

"Very well," said the taller. "Come on, dear." She took Lucilia's hand.

Lucilia didn't resist—what was the point? She took the proffered hand in her own. But when the two women turned around, her father winked at her and shewed her out of the room with a flick of his wrist. She laughed, bewildered by her father's seemingly incongruous gesture, and followed the two women out of the room. They didn't appear to have noticed her father's expression.

Lucilia's room was cold and bare compared to the warmth she had enjoyed the night before. She flopped onto her mattress and dismissed the two servants. Once they had gone and closed the door, she lit a small oil lamp on her bedside table. Usually one to strike up a conversation with the serving body of the household, Lucilia hadn't even tried to learn about these two women. It wasn't that she blamed them for anything—they were slaves and couldn't do a lot to help their situation—but she blamed them for being so ready to do her father's bidding. They were so willing to believe that she wasn't in her right mind. No one questioned Lucilius in his household.

She pulled a sketchbook out from under her pillow and flipped to a blank page. Taking up the stylus that had been stowed in a cleverly crafted pouch on the book's binding, she began to draw a sketch of the meeting room, the bodies dancing, the tables filled with amphorae and plates of fruit. She liked drawing because it was something she could do while thinking about other things; she needn't devote her entire attention to it, because it didn't matter if it was good or not—no one would ever see it. Drawing wasn't a respectable hobby for a patrician lady, her father constantly reminded her. The situation with Secunda weighed heavily on her mind. She hoped that Decia would find a way to remedy that before it got out of hand, but she herself couldn't even begin to think how that was possible. Maybe Paculla would know.

She wished that Habilis would come. He always gave good and reassuring advice, qualities that were seldom present in others.

For a while, she forgot entirely about the Senate's decree. After all, who had really been punished for participating in the cult? She didn't know anyone personally

who had. It seemed like it was happening so far away and to other people. Maybe it wouldn't even affect them in Rome proper. Even as she thought this, though, she knew it wasn't true. What they said about the Roman Senate was the only truth, and that was that the Roman Senate was the law. There were probably *triumviri capitales** already on the streets, looking for nighttime fires or large gatherings of people so that they could discover the so-called conspiracy and rout it. The *quaestors* were probably already positioning themselves to bribe people for information about the cult and its participants. The Senate had long arms. Even if she and Decia could hide out somewhere, where would they go?

And what about Ulpus?

She hated that she had to think about him, but she did. After all, he was decent to her. Could she really just turn her back on their engagement? An engagement she had always known she would eventually have to fulfill. Didn't it, in a way, violate what she stood for—what all the Bacchantes stood for—if she just disregarded his feelings as though they were insignificant? If she didn't even respect him enough as a human being to inform him of her reasons for breaking her agreement, instead treating him as some sort of unfeeling statue. Maybe she should tell him about her situation, because he didn't understand. But maybe he still wouldn't understand. The risks of that were too great. If she told him about her participation in the cult, about herself and Decia, about how it made her feel fulfilled and welcome in a way that coming home never had, could he be trusted not to tell the Senate? Not to tell her father? How could she be sure?

A knocking at her door interrupted her thoughts.

“Yes?” she asked, quickly stowing her sketchbook under her pillow in case it was Lucilius.

The door opened and Habilis slipped inside, putting his finger to his lips to hush her and closing the door firmly behind him.

“Are you okay?” he asked, sitting down beside her on the bed.

“Yes. Worried about Decia and the situation, but otherwise all right,” she said. “I’m glad you came. I was afraid I’d be locked in here all day.”

“Actually,” said Habilis, “you may be. At least until dinner, anyway. I heard Ulpius wants to see you later. And what got into you anyway? Talking to Lucilius like that, it’s a wonder he didn’t do worse than restrict you to your room.”

Lucilia frowned.

“But anyway, I think you’ll want to hear what I found out first. It may not be a good day to press your father, especially since he caught you sneaking back in this morning.”

“I was thinking about that,” said Lucilia. “I should just say I was at Decia’s. She told him about . . . our relationship. He won’t like it, but it’s better than the alternative.”

“Is it?” asked Habilis. “Well, listen to me. I think he knows.”

“Knows what?” she asked, getting up and checking that no one was outside of the door.

“Think about it. Why else would you be locked in here all day? I doubt very seriously if he even cares about you and Decia. Sure, he probably doesn’t like it, but it isn’t going to ruin your engagement to Ulpus. Ulpus is in love with you and would forgive you if you asked him to, as I’m sure your father intends you to do. I mean that I think he knows where you really were last night.”

“But how would he know that?” asked Lucilia. “Unless . . . that girl, Secunda?”

“Exactly. I spoke to your mother last night. She knows who Secunda really is. And you aren’t safe here.”

“I should have told Paculla sooner,” said Lucilia. Her limbs felt like they were floating, not really attached to her body. In fact, her whole body didn’t feel like her own—sensations were distant, detached.

“I think she followed your mother,” said Habilis.

“I don’t understand what she was doing there, though,” said Lucilia. “Mother, I mean.”

“She’s old friends with Paculla. I thought you knew that. Anyway, she usually stays here in case your father needs her, but after dinner last night she must have felt that she needed to go one last time, celebrate the rites, enjoy herself a little. I’m surprised she risked it.”

“So she’s initiated. Then why would she let someone follow her? And from this house, too!”

“I’m not sure,” said Habilis. “Maybe she didn’t realize she was being followed. You know how detached from reality she can become at times. Secunda must have gotten back before you and told Lucilius. What really concerns me is what he’ll do with that knowledge.”

“Why? What did he say?” asked Lucilia. “How long was he waiting for me anyway? You’d think he could forgive his own daughter.”

Habilis shifted on the edge of her bed, bowing his head and looking at his hands as if he couldn’t understand how they had come to be attached to his wrists. “At least three hours before sunrise is your mother’s best estimate,” he said.

“So you’ve seen her this morning. Why? She doesn’t have anything to do with the business accounts or any financial responsibilities,” said Lucilia suspiciously.

“What would you and she be doing practically before sunrise?” She noticed the blush creeping onto Habilis’ usually stoic face. “Oh!” she said, not sure whether to laugh or worry. “You and she . . .?” prompted Lucilia, wanting him to say something definite.

“Yes, your mother and I have been . . . having an affair,” Habilis said.

“Well, that’s not so bad,” said Lucilia. “It’s about time someone appreciated her anyway. Father’s always too busy with his mistresses to notice her much.”

“Well,” Habilis said, his blush deepening, “It’s been going on for longer than you think.” He smiled happily at her then, and she wondered where this sudden optimism had come from when she had just been spied on and found to be guilty of conspiring with known outlaws. “I’ve always loved your mother,” he said. “I’ve always loved you.”

Lucilia was only surprised that she had never guessed it before. It certainly explained all the times she'd walked in on Habilis helping her mother with something that didn't seem to need done, such as rearranging furniture in her bedroom or cutting flowers at the kitchen sink. And then there were all the times he had gone out of his way to be kind to her, such as allowing her friend Decia to participate in the lessons he had taught her as a youth—the innumerable hours of geometry, composition, and literature.

“But that’s not the point,” he said. “She told me something else that worries me even more. She said that she overheard him talking to one of his so-called associates yesterday afternoon. Of all things, they were talking about the decree. This friend of your father’s was saying that he had just tried his mother-in-law. Caelia was her name. He was apparently bragging to your father about how, even though he didn’t want to punish such an elderly woman, he had been forced to find her guilty of the charges based on evidence of her participation—there was an eye-witness—and that she had subsequently been executed. Well, apparently Lucilius was eager for details: how had he convinced the rest of the family to go along with it, was it really legal, how could he prove that his mother-in-law had really been doing criminal activities. That’s the worst of it, because this friend told your father that it didn’t matter whether she had actually hurt anyone, the point was that she had definitively been seen out carousing with other Bacchantes, and that was enough to make her guilty of conspiracy. This was the substance of the conversation according to your mother, but I believe her. Her memory is impeccable.”

“What should I do?” Lucilia asked. “This is terrible. Why would she have let him find out about either of us participating in the cult after that!”

“I don’t think she did it on purpose,” Habilis said. “I think she hinted to him earlier in the day, right after the decree was first posted in the Forum. She was trying to get a feel for his leniency in the matter—see if he would be willing to forgive your participation should he find out about it. I’m sure she didn’t mean to tip him off. He’s been suspicious of you for a long time now, anyway. I think she truly believed she could convince him not to punish either of you if he did happen to find out that you were involved in the cult, but after talking to him, she realized that it wouldn’t happen. You should just act as if you don’t know anything about the cult or that conversation. I don’t see how it would benefit you to address the subject directly. Eventually, he may come around and forgive you. He’s not going to be nice, though. The entire situation compromises his political ambitions.”

“Unless he turns me in,” said Lucilia. “In that case, it would work out quite well in favor of my father’s ambitions. Gods. You know he won’t really forgive me.”

Habilis hugged her.

“You know I’ll always help you in any way I can,” he said.

“Well, will you just send Decia word about what’s happened? She’s forbidden from coming here and I don’t know how to reach her otherwise now that I can’t leave the domus without drawing suspicion. I’m too suspicious of the other help to send one of the errand boys out with a note.”

“Gladly. Do you want me to tell her anything else?”

Lucilia thought about this a moment before making up her mind. “Yes. Tell her I’ll meet her tonight in the usual place. Tell her that I said I was sure now. She’ll know what that means.”

“Okay, Lucilia. I’m going to go before your father wonders where I’ve gone off to. I’ll come back and check on you later if I can. Talk to Ulpius; he’ll be more understanding than you think.”

“We’ll see,” said Lucilia. “Thank you, Habilis.”

Lucilia hugged him again more fiercely than before and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“Be careful,” she said.

He nodded. “Try to get some sleep. You look awful,” he said as he got up. He went out, closing the door.

As soon as he was gone, Lucilia got up and rubbed her hands over her face vigorously, trying to make herself alert despite the creeping exhaustion that was slowly threatening to overcome her. She had things to do before she could succumb to sleep. She began rummaging in a chest at the foot of her bed. She got out several tunics, a pair of old riding boots, and a spare *palla*. She would do well to lay out her clothes in advance, in case something happened to complicate things before she had a chance to get away. She would do as Habilis asked and talk to Ulpius about the situation, but she didn’t expect much help from him. She imagined that if she were in his position, and her betrothed were contemplating running off with her friend, that she would not be in a very charitable mood toward him. Generosity had its limits.

Lucilia had finished packing and stowed a small bag of items she thought she might need under her mattress when there came a loud bang on the door of her *cubiculum*. Her room was lit only by the small candle on her bedside table, and it was sputtering like it was about to go out. She rose to see who wanted her now. It was probably one of the household servants summoning her to dinner.

“Yes?” she asked as she opened the wooden door.

It was not one of the servants, though. It was her father himself.

“Good. You haven’t left,” he said. He entered the room, pushing the door open wider as he passed through.

“I hadn’t exactly been given that option,” she said, flopping back down onto her bed and crossing her arms over her chest.

Lucilius sighed. “And what have I told you about using candles?”

“It’s a waste of money; we can ill-afford to use them in the daytime,” Lucilia said, mimicking his tone of voice.

“I know you think I’m harsh,” he said. “Your mother always thinks I’m too strict and difficult. There are reasons for that, though.”

“Mhm,” said Lucilia, wishing he would skip the justifications and just tell her what he had come to tell her.

“I doubt that you fully grasp the ramifications of my relationship with certain senators. It’s important—more so now than ever before—that I remain on good terms with them.”

“And you want me to do what to ensure this?” she asked, restraining the smirk that threatened to overtake her features. “Give up the rest of my life to a man I barely know. Sounds like a fair deal to me.”

“It certainly wouldn’t hurt for you to stop gallivanting around the city in the middle of the night. Never mind Ulpius. What would anyone think if they saw you out on the streets in company with slaves, and male ones at that? In the middle of the night!”

Lucilia was silent for a minute, but then started giggling again. “Oh yes, I’m in danger from our own slaves. Even if I were out at night, one would think you’d want me to have a guard with me. Especially with all these criminals the Senate’s claiming are flooding Rome with immoral behaviors.”

“You were seen,” said Lucilius.

“By whom?” Lucilia asked, restraining her laughter.

“That’s not important,” he said. “Someone saw you, and in the company of Decia, that opportunistic wench. After I expressly forbade it.”

“Don’t call Decia names,” said Lucilia. “She’s never been anything but kind to me. You’re only worried about people being out for profit because that’s what motivates you. You could care less if I’m being used—look at you—you’re using me yourself. Money, political gain, what’s the difference?”

Lucilius smacked her across the mouth, knocking her head to the side. “Go ahead, keep disrespecting me,” he said.

Lucilia laughed. “Beat me, go ahead. We’ll see what Ulpus thinks when he sees that his bride-to-be is black and blue by her own father’s hand. Where will his support for you be then?”

“All I had to do to find out where you went last night was give Decia a few *sestertii** and she was willing to confess everything you’ve been up to lately. It just goes to show where her loyalties really lie. Why else did you think I wanted to talk to her after dinner? She doesn’t need a bodyguard to walk a few blocks.”

“You’re wrong,” said Lucilia. “Decia wouldn’t accept your money—even if she needed it. And anyway, I told you—I was out for a walk. I didn’t see Decia after she left our home.”

“Every time you speak, I believe you less,” he said.

“So then why come here to talk to me about it at all?” asked Lucilia.

“I didn’t!” her father snapped. “I came here to make sure you weren’t going to cause any mischief tonight. Ulpus will be here soon. I’ve already told you what I expect your behavior to be; if you stray from that, there will be consequences. I can barely afford to pay an adequate dowry as it is. If anything were to happen to cause him to raise his price, you would no longer have enough financial backing to secure such a match. You’d better behave. If not for yourself, then do it for me. Though I assure you, you will benefit from this marriage in the long run.”

“Well, what do you want me to say to that? It’s not as if I ever intend to interfere with your plans,” said Lucilia. “But don’t you think I might want some say in who I’m going to live with? No, of course you don’t. Everything is about money with

you. ‘Marry Ulpus because he’s a good match’? Ptch. It’s more like ‘marry Ulpus because he’s a profitable match, willing to supply half the dowry* himself.’”

“Don’t mock me, girl,” said her father. “I’m not afraid of giving you a few bruises. I expect you at supper in half an hour. And do try to wear something flattering for once.”

He walked out of her room, leaving the door open.

“Wear something flattering for once!” said Lucilia to herself, picking up a brush off a nearby stand and running it through her hair with a violence usually reserved for pulling stubborn weeds in the garden.

6

Day 2: Evening

Lucilia walked into the dining room only an hour after her father had left her room. She had changed into a more formal gown than the one she'd been wearing, and draped a red shawl around her shoulders. She had contemplated rubbing some scented oil into her hair, but didn't want to give Ulpus too strong of an impression as she was just going to leave him anyway. No one was in the dining room except for a few slaves standing behind the table, waiting to be of use to Lucilius or a guest. Lucilia suspected that they were better equipped to monitor her behavior than to serve food. She took a seat in her usual place at the dinner table, watching as a young girl polished the already impeccable wooden surface of the table. The servants didn't say anything to her, either about dinner being cancelled or postponed, or about getting her a drink or a refreshment, confirming her suspicions about their duty as spies for her father. She beckoned to the young girl who was needlessly shining the table. She could not have been much older than fourteen, her hair was barely past her shoulders and she had not yet filled out, still occupying the lithe, androgynous body of an adolescent. Lucilia didn't recognize her.

"What's your name?" Lucilia asked the girl, pulling out a chair nearby, and gesturing for the girl to sit down.

"Marcella," she said.

"I see," said Lucilia. "You're new to this household then?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Marcella. "I only just arrived yesterday."

“And what did you do before that?” asked Lucilia.

“I was a cook in my family’s inn,” she said, wringing her hands in her lap.

Lucilia could see that the girl was trying not to cry. It was strange behavior for a household slave, even in Lucilius’ house. The girl should be thankful she hadn’t been sold to one of the *latefundia*; the work was much harder, more thankless, and the slaves were treated far more cruelly. Lucilia always thought of the horror stories Habilis had told her of his father working on a large farm: the sicknesses that went untreated, the beatings, the general over-working of the slave population in such places, not to mention the deaths because of insubordination. But Lucilia knew that her judgment of the girl wasn’t fair. It was easy to forget that being someone else’s servant, no matter how pampered a servant, was dehumanizing. And the girl had only just recently been sold. Lucilia presumed her parents had sold her. It was a common practice when girl children were too abundant, especially in the lower classes where they weren’t likely to curry much of a dowry from marriage. But the acceptability of the practice would hardly be a consolation to this child, who had been ripped from her home so young. There was an innocence about Marcella’s demeanor that Lucilia knew would fade before long as she was confronted more and more with the harsh realities of life as a slave. Lucilia hoped her father would at least wait a few years before expecting Marcella to join his other concubines.

“I’m sorry,” said Lucilia, squeezing the girl’s arm. “Well, my father is a harsh master, but he isn’t unfair. If you save your money, you’ll be free in a shorter time than I’m sure you think.” Even as she spoke, Lucilia knew the chances were very slim.

Habilis, after all, had been an excellent example of an obedient and productive slave for as long as she could remember, and he was still under Lucilius' yoke.

When the girl just nodded and dropped her chin to rest on her chest, Lucilia rose to embrace her. She gave the girl a hug, patting her on the head as one would a small child. "Is there any chance you'll ever get to see them again?" asked Lucilia. "Your family, I mean."

Marcella took a deep breath, which caught in her throat as she let it out, causing her to cough. "I don't think so, ma'am," she said.

"If you want, I can try to help you out so you can go visit them sometimes," said Lucilia. "I can probably convince Mother that you'd be a good replacement for the old Gaia, our washwoman. She's a dear, but I doubt if she'll make it too many more winters, not with that gout."

Marcella nodded, but tears flowed freely from her eyes, and she sobbed so piteously that Lucilia had to force herself to remain stoic. She could feel the anger boiling up again beneath the surface of her conscious mind. How could children like this be ripped from their homes, families torn apart, and it not be a crime?

"And don't call me ma'am," Lucilia said to the girl. "You should call me Lucilia."

Marcella's face was swollen and red from crying, but Lucilia thought she'd never seen such a brave child before in her life. Sure, it was sad when boys barely older than Marcella got killed on the battlefield—and Lucilia was sure that if she had a brother who got killed she'd cry over him—but this child had been cast out of her

family for probably little more than a few copper pennies, and now she found herself in a strange environment with hostile masters, all the while completely helpless to affect her own fate. She hoped that the girl's liveness would save her from Lucilius' attentions, at least, but she had no real hope that he'd concern himself overmuch with the status of his slave's development. Rome might have the greatest fighting force in the known world, but it had a lot to learn when it came to social institutions.

Just then, her father walked into the room in company with Ulpus. Marcella hurried to stand by the other slaves, but Lucilia held her ground midway between the servants and the table.

"I see you're fraternizing with the slaves again," said Lucilius, casting a dour glare at her and shaking his head.

"I'm glad to see you already take an interest in household affairs," Ulpus said, smiling at Lucilia. "It's good practice for when you're in charge of your own slaves. Do you have any?"

"Any what?" Lucilia asked.

"Slaves," said Ulpus.

"No . . ." said Lucilia.

"Go on," said Lucilius. "Tell him what happened to your slave."

"Oh, don't call Ancilla that," said Lucilia, gritting her teeth. "I freed her. When I was twelve."

"Really?" said Ulpus, who was laughing and heading to a seat next to her at the table.

“Really,” said Lucilius. “Is that not the most wasteful thing you’ve ever heard? Slaves don’t grow on trees.”

“I suppose that depends on how necessary she was to the household, and specifically to Lucilia,” said Ulpus. “Did you ever regret her loss?”

“Never,” said Lucilia immediately. “I can do everything for myself that needs doing.”

“I don’t doubt that,” said Ulpus, smiling again and gesturing for Lucilius to join them at the table.

“I have other arrangements,” Lucilius said. “I’m taking your mother to her uncle’s for supper. We haven’t visited that side of the family for some time, and I figured now was as good a time as any to catch up.”

Lucilia coughed loudly. What was her father up to? Valeria’s relatives were mostly deceased or living far away. She wanted to point this out to Ulpus, just to hear her father’s justification for lying, but didn’t want to make him angrier.

“You know best,” said Ulpus. “Will anyone else be joining us, then?” he asked, turning to Lucilia for an answer.

He meant Decia. Lucilia blushed and shook her head. “No,” she said, meeting her father’s gaze.

“I see,” Ulpus said, smiling at what he must have thought had been a humorous family quarrel between the two of them. “Have a good evening then,” he said to Lucilius.

“I expect I’ll see you soon,” said Lucilia’s father, turning to leave. “Be good, Child.”

“Be good, Child,” she repeated under her breath.

“What’s that?” said Ulpus.

“Oh nothing,” she said.

He laughed and gestured to a servant holding the jug of wine.

“You may leave this here,” he said. “And two cups. Take your fellows with you. You can bring out the food when it’s ready, but otherwise we have no need of your assistance.”

“That was kind of you,” she said to him. “They’ve probably been standing there since breakfast.”

“Surely your father wouldn’t allow such indolence,” said Ulpus. “But, as you say, I can do for myself what needs doing. I appreciate your father’s generosity with his slaves, but it never ceases to amaze me that he has so many for such a small family.”

“That’s an easy enough thing to explain,” said Lucilia, grimacing. “He has several kept mistresses, you know. He doesn’t have the nerve to say no to them when they have children. He just keeps their progeny and incorporates them into the household retinue.”

“Really? I’ve heard of men doing that, but it seems somehow barbaric. It’s certainly not fair to the wife, to flaunt one’s other conquests in front of her. Does your mother never protest?”

Lucilia scoffed. “And what? Divorce* my father? No, she’s too traditional for that, too well-bred. She obeys him in nearly everything.”

“And you are like her?”

“Not at all,” said Lucilia, thinking about all the times her father had disrespected and chastised her mother, all the times he had lectured her like a child or openly dismissed her opinions as frivolous. If she were in her mother’s place, she would have said something, somehow forced him to show due respect, even if for nothing other than the rearing of his child.

Ulpus had poured her some wine as well, and now she sipped it, retaining the cup for something to fidget with until the food arrived.

“Did your father tell you that I was coming to dinner?” asked Ulpus.

“Yes . . . although I did expect other people to be here.”

“Are you nervous, then?” he asked, setting his cup down and taking her free hand in both of his. “Don’t be. I just thought it would be best if we spent some time alone together before the ceremony.”

“Of course,” she said.

“Nevertheless, I’m surprised at Decia’s absence. The two of you seem very close. I know she’s a good friend to you.”

Lucilia felt her cheeks growing warm. “She is,” said Lucilia, frowning down into her cup.

“I really wouldn’t be put out if you asked her to join us. I’m sure she’s lurking around here somewhere anyway; she usually is.”

“No. Not this time,” said Lucilia. “My father thought it might be best if she weren’t here for a few days.”

“Why on earth not? Surely she’s not putting him out any. I saw how much she ate last night; it’s not as if she’s a gluttonous guest. It’s something else. What is it? Did she take something from him?” He smiled as though it were a joke.

“No,” said Lucilia immediately. “You have it all wrong. He’s not really upset with her. He’s upset with me. He banned her from the household.”

“Why,” asked Ulpius, taking his hand back.

“It’s complicated to explain.” Lucilia met his eyes for the first time since he’d entered the room. His eyes were gray, and when she looked into them, they seemed to get larger until she felt as though she were looking into depths of water in an opaque well. He really was handsome. “You’re a *quaestor* now?” she asked.

“Yes, but only just. I’m glad you remembered.” Ulpius smiled at her again. “I wish you would tell me what’s going on, though. I come here expecting you to have come to terms with our arrangement, to maybe even be rejoicing, since it’s obvious to all but the blind and deaf that there’s no love lost between you and your father, and what do I find? You’re here by yourself looking glum, and I hope you don’t mind my saying, utterly exhausted. I mean, you’re only twenty and you’ve bags under your eyes that would look out of place on a woman twice your age. What’s the matter? If I’m to be your husband, you ought to start by trusting me to help you.”

Lucilia took a long drink from her cup, wiped her mouth on the back of her hand and sat up as straight as she possibly could. She thought about how Decia would

act, and tilted her head up accordingly, pointing her chin at an angle slightly higher than usual.

“That’s just it. I know I’m going to marry you. My father says so. My mother says so. You say so. Who else’s opinion matters? It’s as good as done. But I wish I’d been consulted, not merely informed. Don’t mistake my words, you’re a perfect match and according to my father I don’t deserve you, but you just don’t understand how things are.”

“How things are with you? Or how things are with Decia?”

Lucilia paused for a moment, furrowing her brow. “What?” she said.

“I do talk to your father, you know. He’s more trusting than you think, especially once he’s had a bit more wine than is customary for him. He told me about last night.”

“Oh,” said Lucilia., feeling even more betrayed that her father had told someone else than that he had spied on her activities in the first place. “For what it’s worth, I would still have married you anyway . . . I mean, I’m still going to marry you.”

“I’m afraid it’s a bit more complicated than that, though. Do you realize that with the evidence your father’s concubine managed to collect last night, you could be convicted for affiliation with that cult?”

“Well, he really does tell you everything,” said Lucilia. “He hasn’t even made such an accusation to me yet.”

“He may not be the only one watching your movements,” said Ulpus. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. The cult is under investigation, a very serious investigation. Every Senator and his brother who has a carousing wife whom he wishes to put back in line has a vested interest in who and what is actually involved in the cult. Think of how easy it makes correcting disobedience! If all a patrician has to do to get his wife back in line is accuse her of affiliation, whether false or true, with the severity of the penalty, most women would surely not proceed to act out against their husbands.”

“You don’t really think about it like that,” said Lucilia. “Your view of the situation is callous. Some of them probably do care about their wives, you know.”

“Oh, that I don’t doubt. I’m merely suggesting that a lot of them probably would go to such extremes to prevent or stop their wives from making them look bad. When the career of a politician relies so heavily on appearances, what else can they do about wives who insist on gallivanting with criminals?”

“A lot you know,” said Lucilia.

“And you know more? Tell me,” said Ulpus.

Lucilia became reticent, refusing to speak further about the matter.

“I just don’t want you to be convicted of a crime of which I know you’re innocent.” Ulpus smiled at her, but she didn’t return his optimism.

“And you really believe I’m so innocent?” Lucilia asked, raising an eyebrow at him and pouring herself another glass of wine.

“Of treason, yes. For associating with members of that cult? Who can say? We know Decia’s one of them, but your father said he wasn’t sure if you were or if Decia was still trying to convert you. Now, I’m willing to help you however I can, but you have to tell me what the situation is. I’ve loved you from the moment I first saw you bundled in a cloak and whispering to Decia at last year’s Saturnalia* games. I knew then that I wanted to meet you. And since, I’ve come to care for you dearly. We’re compatible—you would see that if you would give it a chance. But I don’t want you to marry me if it isn’t your desire to do so. I know a lot of men wouldn’t care so much what a prospective wife wanted, and maybe I wouldn’t care so much myself if she were anyone but you, but I want you to be happy. However I can help to bring that about, I will.”

“Do you swear to me that you won’t tell my father about this conversation?” asked Lucilia. “I mean, for starters, he can’t find out anything else.”

“Done,” said Ulpus

“I don’t trust the servants to be loyal to me or to be deaf, so let’s just say that it’s as you suspect and Decia and I make our decisions together in regards to our religious practices.”

“I see,” said Ulpus, getting up from his chair and walking across the room to check the main entranceway. He checked the rear entrance as well, peering around the marble pedestal that stood at the corner of the doorway. “All clear,” he said, resuming his seat.

“You have to understand that we were both initiated a long time ago,” said Lucilia. “The rites are religious in nature and we engage in them to commune with our chosen deity. Are you a member of any cult?”

“No, I haven’t had that particular inclination,” said Ulpus. “Not yet, anyway. So, you’re both members of the Bacchic cult. You should have stopped meeting when the decree was posted to the Forum several days ago. Why didn’t you?”

“I told you. It’s our religious duty to worship our god.”

“And you can’t do that privately?”

“Of course we can and do,” Lucilia said. “We all give private homage to Bacchus for protection and good fortune. But the point is to show respect and gratitude for his bounty. I guess any one of us could drink and dance alone and it would be better than nothing as a means of gaining his attention, but in times of danger, it’s better to maintain our numbers. The more of us who participate, the more likely the chance is that Bacchus will show us a sign of how we might be helped. How we might help ourselves. He doesn’t usually speak as loudly to individuals.”

“And has he shown you such a sign?” Ulpus asked, curling his upper lip in a sneer.

“Maybe,” she said, thinking about the night before—the strange voice she had heard. “Now, you tell me how Decia is. How much trouble is she in? Have they taken her into custody yet?”

“I don’t think so, but I can’t be sure. I advised your father not to go to the Senate until he had determined the extent of your involvement. After all, I’m sure he

doesn't want to punish his own daughter by his carelessness. If he turns her in, you'll automatically be suspected merely because of your close ties to her."

"You have to get me out of here," said Lucilia. Her wine was gone now. She picked up the jug and poured herself some more, poured so much indeed that her cup was nearly overflowing before she set the jug back down on the table. She picked the cup up in a shaking hand, causing some of the wine to splash out. It landed on the bust of her stola, staining the white cloth the color of fresh blood. She took a gulp from the cup and rose to her feet.

"Come on," she said.

"Calm down. Something has to be done," Ulpius began. "I agree. But I do—"

"Well at least don't interfere then! I didn't realize how much he knew."

"Lucilia, calm down," said Ulpius. "It'll be okay. I'll do what—"

"Sh," said Lucilia, pausing in mid-step. "Do you hear that?"

Ulpius cocked his head to the side and waited.

"No," he said. "What is it?"

"I don't know, it sounds like metal," she said. "Like a small version of a triumphal processions."

Two men jogged through the doorway and into view then, closely followed by two more. They were dressed in the leather accoutrements of legionnaires, complete with the thick *sagum* hanging around their shoulders to protect them from the inclement weather, short swords, and bronze cuirasses typical of the sort the army distributed to its soldiers.

“Lucilia, *filia* of Sextus Lucilius Figulus?” asked one of the two in the front, coming to a halt and placing a hand on his sword, causing his cloak to fall open in the front and reveal a nasty scar on his right arm. He had close-cropped hair with a deep widow’s peak and piercing blue eyes. His voice was rolling gravel on a mountainside.

Ulpus rose to his feet, putting a hand on Lucilia’s shoulder and staring at the soldier who had spoken.

“Name and rank, commander,” Ulpus demanded of the blonde man with military decorations affixed to his shoulder.

“Sit down,” the officer told Ulpus. “You don’t have the *imperium** to question me. Miss, you’re going to have to come with us,” he said. He beckoned to Lucilia, but she made no move to join him.

“Ulpus,” she said. “Are you any part of this?”

“Does it sound like I am?” Ulpus asked, impotently fiddling with the sword at his side. Lucilia had always suspected it was more a decorative piece than an actual weapon. She wondered if it was even sharp.

“Miss, please, don’t make this harder on yourself than it has to be. Just come along now,” the officer said again.

“Ulpus. Do something!” she hissed.

Ulpus, however, was staring toward the door. She looked over and realized that her father was standing in the arch of the doorway, his hands on his hips, and a smug smirk on his face.

“Father!” Lucilia cried. “What are you doing? Tell them that I’ve done nothing wrong.”

Lucilius merely looked at her, blinked once, and then he looked away.

“Father,” she said again, holding back tears that threatened to ruin her façade of composure.

Although the officer appeared to be standing at ease now, his hand was still gripping the hilt of his gladius so firmly that Lucilia could see the whitening of his knuckles.

“Quit calling me that, girl,” Lucilius said. “I know.”

“You know?” said Lucilia. “You know what?”

“Well, I know where you were last night, for one,” he said, giving her a withering gaze from the other side of the room.

“Father, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said. She tried to wipe her face free of the tears that had begun trickling down her cheeks, but each time she thought she had succeeded, more fell. “This is a mistake.”

“I think I understand enough,” Lucilius said. “I’m not your father,” his voice cracked,, but he continued speaking anyway, “no, after all these years, it’s just another one of your mother’s lies. You’re just another one of her lies.”

“What? I don’t understand,” said Lucilia.

“No, you wouldn’t. You’ve always been dense. That was the first clue. But I overlooked it, thinking you just had a few too many of your mother’s more negative qualities and not enough of my positive ones! I would have been rid of her years ago,

had it not been for her skill in deflecting rumors from my name. But let me spell it out for you. H-A-B-I-L-I-S,” he said, clenching his hands into fists.

Lucilia was shocked into silence by her father’s raving. He’d always been prone to fits, but this was something else. What was the matter with him? But if it was true . . . about Habilis A flood of relief came pouring over Lucilia then as she contemplated the possibility, but lurking in the corner of her mind was a glimmer of doubt. What if he was trying to goad her into admitting something? What if this was all a pretext to get her to confess her allegiance to the cult? What if this, like everything else that day, involved his disapproval of her friendship with Decia? Was he testing her? “What does Habilis have to do with anything?” she asked, deciding not to play into Lucilius’ agenda. If he wanted to accuse people of things, let him do it outright—not through implication and suggestion.

“I found this among his belongings when I dismissed him from service this morning,” said Lucilius, brandishing a neatly folded square of linen.

Lucilia could see that there were ink stains on the impromptu writing surface, but she couldn’t make out what they said. She started laughing, but whether in relief that maybe Lucilius wasn’t her father after all or in despair even she didn’t know for certain.

“Dismissed? You mean you freed him?” Lucilia asked.

“No, not exactly,” said Lucilius. “I gave him a head start before I turned his name into the authorities for proper capture and punishment.” Lucilius had a smug look on his face.

“Father, how could you! He’s been loyal to you for all these years,” screamed Lucilia.

“He’s been loyal to your mother, not to me,” said Lucilius. “And I told you to quit calling me that.”

Lucilia started laughed again, but didn’t respond. The three soldiers were standing straight and unmoving nearby. None were particularly close to the door, but Lucilia knew that if she so much as made a move to flee they would all be on her in an instant. The commander was still standing near Ulpius, looking confused by the situation.

“Well, what does it say?” interjected Ulpius.

Lucilius passed the folded piece of cloth to the soldier nearest him. “Go on,” said Lucilius. “Read it, so she will no longer be able to deny her knowledge.”

His face was bright red and Lucilia wondered if he was going to cry, too. In twenty years, she had never seen him cry.

“Dear Lucilia,” the soldier began. “I probably won’t be able to see you again, but there were a few things I wanted you to know—about yourself, and about me. As you probably know by now, your father has handed me over to the Senate as a possible conspirator in the cult of Bacchus. He has no evidence other than he saw me coming out of your room this morning, but I think he’s going to try to connect me to Decia and your mother, both of whom he apparently knows for a fact are Bacchantes. My time is brief as I suspect soldiers will be coming to take me away any moment now. I wanted you to know, so that perhaps what comes next won’t hurt you so much,

that Lucilius was never your father, not really anyway. You were the child of an affair between me and your mother. We loved each other dearly, and still do. To protect you, she told Lucilius that you were his, but it isn't true. Know that I've done all I could to protect you throughout your life, and still would if I were free to do so. This is the last safeguard I can give you—the knowledge that you've done nothing wrong . . .”

“You can stop now,” said Lucilius.

“Is that all?” Lucilia asked.

“No, there are a few more lines,” said the soldier.

“Then continue,” said Lucilia.

“I said no!” screamed Lucilius.

“I think she has a right to hear it,” said Ulpius, calmly sipping from his cup of wine.

The soldier looked back and forth between Lucilius and Lucilia, and then continued reading. ““And the knowledge that when he's blamed you for his problems, financial and otherwise, it has never been your fault. If he hadn't betrayed his older brother, he would have had more support. If he hadn't shunned your mother's family, the same would be true. You could never have been expected to be any different than you are. I'm proud of you. I know Decia would be, too.”” The soldier folded the linen back up, and handed it to Lucilius, who let it fall to the floor rather than touch it again.

Lucilia was weeping openly and unabashedly now. Ulpius had stood and moved closer to her. He was holding her hand in his.

“And you’d condemn this innocent girl out of jealousy of her mother’s lover?” Ulpus asked. “Lucilius, that’s shameful and petty, even for you. Do you realize the severity of the consequences your actions will beget?” He shook his head. “Don’t worry,” he said to Lucilia. “I’ll work something out if I can. The best thing would be if you just went peaceably with the soldiers now. It can’t help but reflect well upon you if you don’t resist or oppose their investigation.”

She nodded, hugging him and thanking him for his help before stepping over to stand beside the commander. She didn’t look at the man who had been her father for twenty years.

“My name’s Marcus Cassius Strabo,” said the soldier. “I’ve been specially commissioned as one of the *triumviri capitales* by the Senate to help restore order to Rome. I’ve been entrusted with the task of rounding up possible Bacchantes and bringing them to the *Curia** for questioning. If you’ll please accompany me, we’ll leave now.”

“You’ll never marry her now anyway,” said Lucilius. “I wish I’d had a son. If your stupid mother was going to go sleep around with the servants, you’d think she could have at least conceived a male offspring instead of another useless female. You won’t even do the one thing you’d be good for. And what does that leave me? I’ve wasted so much on you, to have you defy me and refuse to marry, refuse to help your family regain its status. You’re a disgrace.”

Cassius shot a disgusted look in Lucilius’ direction. “I think that’s enough,” he said, gesturing for Lucilia to follow him.

“Fine, go ahead, take her. She’s no use to me now anyway,” shouted Lucilius.

Ulpus stared after Lucilia as she followed the commander out of the room.

The other soldiers marched close behind her, flanking her on either side.

7

Day 2: Evening

Rome was crisp that day. Lucilia noticed the vestiges of a frost still clinging to shrubs and the eaves of buildings as they walked. She was glad it wasn't yet completely dark out because the road underfoot was slippery. She was thankful that the soldiers had allowed her to don more enclosing shoes; her house slippers would have resulted in her feet being frostbitten. She'd also grabbed a cloak and was grateful for its woolen material now that she was out in the cold wind of the final days of winter. She was glad, too, that they hadn't bound her hands. Cassius was obviously the commander; not only had he been the only one to speak during the confrontation between the soldiers and her father, but also he was the only one bearing military decorations. Though not overly familiar with the various military awards, Lucilia was at least able to recognize the golden *torc** he wore around his neck. The twisted metal necklace was typical as a trophy for valorous deeds on the battlefield. She walked along behind Cassius peacefully enough, wondering if there were any way to endear herself to these military men and at the same time figuring it was hopeless.

She wanted to ask one of the soldiers, maybe Cassius, about Decia, but she had yet to find the willpower to risk being reprimanded again, even though she knew that nothing any soldier of Rome could say would be worse than the scathing rejection of her father . . . well, of Lucilius. It was strange to think that the man she had always called father was not even a blood relation. She wondered if it mattered. It mattered in Rome, it mattered in politics, and it mattered in finances, but did it, could it, change

the sense of betrayal she felt at the realization that Lucilius would sacrifice her for political gain. She doubted she'd ever trust another man again. Even if Lucilius had no obligation to her anymore, she would have thought he would still want to protect her—that he would at least care about her welfare after twenty years of being her father. And where was Decia? Lucilia hoped she was okay, but the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach belied the wish.

When they were a long distance from her *domus* and she no longer recognized the buildings around them, Lucilia finally spoke up.

“Where are we going?” she asked the man beside her. “You said you were taking me to the Curia, but we’ve been going in the wrong direction all this time. At first, I thought we were just going a different way than I’m used to, but apparently that’s not the case.”

“Sh,” said Cassius. “We’re almost there. Don’t do anything to draw attention to us.”

Lucilia wondered why officers of the law would be concerned about drawing attention to themselves . . . if they were acting in accord with the Senate’s wishes. She bit her lip, restraining the urge to ask more questions. She hoped this wasn’t a setup for something more sinister than a trial—not that a trial for treason wouldn’t be bad enough. While she didn’t entirely trust the Senate’s form of justice, she thought that she might at least have a chance of explaining that her involvement in the cult was not unlawful, and didn’t pose any sort of threat to the State. If she could convince enough of the Senators that she was innocent of any actual crimes, they might be willing to

believe the same of Decia. But Decia was of lower birth. But Decia wasn't anymore, Lucilia realized. Lucilia was the child of a slave now, renounced as such by the father who had reared her. It didn't much matter whether anyone could definitively prove whether her father was Lucilius or not. What mattered was that it was disputed, and that her father had no reputation for producing an abundance of offspring. If they didn't believe Decia's word about her involvement in the cult, they weren't going to believe Lucilia's either, about the cult or about her paternal loyalty.

They crossed a small stream on a footbridge barely wide enough for the soldiers to march two abreast. They were in a strange part of Rome now, a part with which Lucilia was wholly unfamiliar.

"My legs are tired. I need to rest," she said, hoping to evoke some sympathy from the soldiers. Sympathy might lead to their willingness to divulge their destination.

"Soon," said one of the soldiers behind her.

Lucilia couldn't stop thinking about Decia. Images of her friend lying dead in a back alley, bloody and maimed, kept flitting through Lucilia's mind. When she would force them away, they'd just be replaced by equally gruesome images of Decia crucified by the soldiers who upheld the Senate's decrees. Or worse, she'd imagine Decia on her knees, begging the Senate for mercy, only to be led away in shackles. Lucilia tried to tell herself that these images were just products of her imagination getting the better of her—that Decia was probably fine and still at home—but she didn't believe that.

Half an hour later, they finally reached a ramshackle building that was so tall that Lucilia had to crane her neck to see the top floor. The lower levels were made of stone, but the higher the building reached, the less sturdy the walls appeared. There were some of wood, and the very top floor seemed to be little more than a collection of blankets stretched across a lopsided frame. Cassius entered the bottom floor through a door made of iron. A sign hanging on a post by the door declared that this was ‘Sempronia’s Tailoring and Cloth Goods’.

“Why are we stopping at a shop?” asked Lucilia.

“Come on,” said Cassius from just inside the chamber. “This is the most secure area in the vicinity.”

The other three soldiers urged Lucilia into the building, shoving her gently when she didn’t move of her own accord.

The air inside was surprisingly warm, but sweet smelling, like narcissuses and roses. The remaining three soldiers followed close on her heels. The last shut the door behind them.

“Sempronia,” called Cassius. “I’ve brought a surprise for you.”

“Tell me what’s going on,” said Lucilia, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Tell me what’s going on right now.”

“In due time,” said Cassius. “Why don’t you make yourself comfortable on the sofa over there. There’s wine on the sideboard.”

Lucilia looked in the direction Cassius was pointing and saw, to her surprise, a lavishly furnished sitting area. The sofa looked soft, but firm enough to support one's weight. And there was, indeed, a rather sizable selection of wines on a table nearby.

She sighed and walked over to the sofa, taking a seat. She never took her eyes from Cassius. He wasn't very tall for a soldier, and despite his military insignia, she saw no ghastly scars that she'd expect on an experienced centurion. He was blonder than most Romans, and his eyes, oddly, were blue.

"Go on then," he said.

"Is this some sort of test?" she asked.

Cassius laughed. "Suit yourself," he said. She decided that his smile was much better than his grimace, but she quickly reminded herself that he was the enemy.

The other soldiers made themselves comfortable on various pieces of furniture around Lucilia's couch. They all poured themselves some of the wine before commencing to chatter about recent gladiatorial matches and whom each of them favored.

"Oh, she's precious!" said a shrill voice. Lucilia could just make out the plump body of an aging woman on the staircase at the back of the room. The woman's hair was done up in a bun on top of her head, and Lucilia could see that it was mostly grey.

"Sempronia," said Cassius. "I'm glad you're here. I need some help."

"I see that, dear," Sempronia said. Calling to Lucilia, she said, "Well, go on, have some of my wine. It will warm you right up!" Turning back to Cassius, she asked, "The same as usual?"

“Yes, unfortunately. She needs to leave Rome immediately.”

“Not without Decia!” Lucilia interjected.

“I see. Who informed on her?” asked Sempronia, frowning at Lucilia.

“Her own father, if you’ll believe that. He’s convinced, and I guess for good reason, that she’s really the child of his slave. I believe you know him, Habilis?”

“Oh, him! Yes, he’s a charmer, that one. But he raised the girl as his own anyway?” asked Sempronia.

“Raised is a general way to put it. Habilis educated me and looked out for me,” said Lucilia.

“Yes,” said Cassius, giving Lucilia a stern glare. “Apparently for twenty years before finding out. It’s a pretty good deception, if you ask me. But anyway, now he wants no part of her so he’s turned her into the Senate as a conspirator.”

“Yes, but how’d he find out?” asked Sempronia.

“He sent one of his slaves to infiltrate the meeting last night and this slave saw Lucilia and her friend there and reported back to him about it,” said Cassius.

“Hmph. Well, that wasn’t a very nice thing for a father to do. But no matter, I’ll take care of it. Is she to travel alone?”

“No! I’m not leaving until I know if Decia’s okay. She was supposed to come with me,” insisted Lucilia.

“The plan was to send her with her friend Decia,” said Cassius calmly, ignoring Lucilia’s outburst, “but I don’t know if we can find her before Lucilia has to

be resituated, let alone free her if she's been captured by these fanatic Senators. We're about to go try, but no one's sure where she is."

"Well do that," said Sempronia, "I'll stay here with the girl. She should be safe here for a few days, but try to hurry. I'm sure the anxiety isn't good for her after all she's been through."

"Very well," said Cassius. "Thank you for your help, Sempronia," he said, bending to kiss the elderly woman on the cheek. "Take care!"

With that, he gestured to his men, who drained their cups as one and rose to follow him out.

"Be careful, Miss," Cassius said to Lucilia. "You never know who you can trust these days."

The soldiers left in a quiet flurry of action, shutting the door firmly behind them,

"They weren't really soldiers, were they?" asked Lucilia once they had gone.

"That depends on your definition of soldier, dear," said Sempronia, coming to sit beside Lucilia on the couch.

She poured them both cups of wine and plopped down beside Lucilia, handing her one of the cups.

"Then who are they?" asked Lucilia. "Thank you," she said, accepting the wine in a shaking hand.

"Of course. That was Cassius and his troupe of loyal comrades. They've been in my service for years now. I took him, Cassius that is, in off the streets when he was

just a boy. I guess his father had left him out to die. Exposure is an awful practice. I wish the Senate would abolish it. Luckily, though, I was there to notice Cassius and in a position to adopt him. I raised him like my own child, I did. I always made sure he was warm and well-fed. I even had him educated. He, of course, was initiated at a young age, but has since found more purpose in acting sentry for the local Bacchantes than in actually participating himself. He's as loyal as they come. If there's anyone I can trust—it's that boy." She nodded gravely, but wasn't looking at Lucilia. "Anyway, did you hear all that or do I need to clarify anything for you?" she asked.

"What's this resituating?" asked Lucilia, frowning at the woman. "Can Decia go with me?"

"Well, you see," said Sempronia, "when someone, such as yourself, finds herself in a situation where she needs to have a new identity, and quickly, Paculla calls on me to help with this. In fact, I help other people not affiliated with your particular sect, too, but I'm primarily Paculla's woman when she needs to disguise people. And of course your friend can go, too, but we have to find her first. Don't worry, Cassius will take care of it. He's very reliable."

"I see," said Lucilia, drawing in a quick breath. "Thank the gods. I really thought those men were going to take me to the Senate House for questioning."

Sempronia laughed, a surprisingly deep sound that caught Lucilia off guard and made her laugh as well.

"Okay, so you disguise me and then what happens?" she asked, beginning to feel more comfortable around this stranger.

“Then I either find you somewhere to live or I find some way for you to get out of the *urbs* proper, in your disguise. I have a very high success rate,” Sempronia said, fluffing a pillow and placing it behind her back.

“I don’t understand, though. How did you even know that someone would require your services? How did Cassius know? How could Paculla even have known yet? The situation couldn’t have transpired more than a few hours ago.”

“Ah,” said Sempronia, giving Lucilia a knowing look and winking at her. “You can come out now, dear,” she called toward the direction of a staircase at the back of the room.

Lucilia watched as someone slowly descended from the upper floor. When the person’s whole frame came into view, Lucilia realized that it was a woman. She shrugged at Sempronia, who motioned for her to be patient.

When the woman finally reached the ground floor, she walked casually toward the sitting area. She was wearing a lot of makeup for a Roman citizen—Lucilia supposed that this woman was another of Paculla’s agents, maybe she assisted with the disguises. But it was strange, because the woman was wearing pants and a short tunic, cinched at the waist with a bright blue sash. Her shoes, too, were as alien as could be. They looked like slippers, were obviously made of something soft like silk, and curled slightly at the toe. By anyone’s account, this woman could have been a princess from one of the Eastern kingdoms.

“Lucilia,” said the woman, grinning at Lucilia. She reached out her hand.

“Mother!” Lucilia exclaimed, springing to her feet and throwing both arms around her mother. “I didn’t recognize you at all until you spoke.”

Her mother laughed, taking a seat on the couch. Lucilia sat beside her, holding her hand.

Sempronia smiled at them both. “I told you it was a good disguise, Valeria,” she said to Lucilia’s mother.

“What are you doing here, though?” asked Lucilia. “How did you get out of the house?”

“With difficulty,” Valeria said, scoffing. “Lucilius is a bastard. When he came barraging into my rooms, raving about some crazy letter from Habilis claiming paternal rights to you, I tried to convince him that what Habilis’s letter said wasn’t true. I hoped at first that I would be able to placate him. But there are many good reasons for him to believe the letter, after all. Look how many children we had after you! He would hear none of my protestations or denunciations.”

Lucilia frowned again. Who was this woman? Where had the passive, docile Valeria she’d known her whole childhood gone?

“How long have you known Paculla?” Lucilia asked, a note of suspicion in her tone.

“Smart girl, I’ll give her that,” said Sempronia, chuckling in the same throaty manner as before.

“Years,” said Valeria, her eyes going glassy. “Since your father and I were young.”

“You mean Habilis? Or Lucilius?” Lucilia asked.

“Either one, really,” her mother said. “But I was referring to Habilis. That’s how I met him, you see.”

“I thought you met him in Fath—in Lucilius’s home when you married him?”

“Well, not exactly. Sure, he worked for Lucilius, but that’s not how I came to know him.” She smiled. “No, we met dancing.”

“I see,” said Lucilia. “Decia told me I should have asked you to come with us. I told her you wouldn’t be interested. Now I find out that you’ve been a worshipper all along. Why haven’t I ever seen you?” she asked. “Why didn’t you ever tell me? You had to have known that Decia and I were involved. Habilis escorted us every week, made sure we didn’t get into any trouble.”

“Well, dear, would it really be good for you to know that your mother was directly defying her husband’s wishes?” asked Valeria, arching an eyebrow and gesturing for Sempronia to pour her a glass of wine.

“Stop with that already, will you? If you’re a devotee, I know that you don’t really think obeying your husband is important.”

“You’re right, I suppose,” said Valeria, pausing to accept the glass of wine Sempronia handed to her. “Thank you,” she said to Sempronia. “Lucilia, how many groups of worshippers do you think there are? Just in Rome?”

“Maybe two or three?” Lucilia said, hesitating.

“It’s more like a hundred, maybe more. But the point is, it was an easy thing to find another group to meet with so that should you ever decide to join, the chances of your seeing me wouldn’t be so great.”

“But Habilis . . .” Lucilia said.

“I know. He goes to Paculla’s. It was a decision we made together. He encouraged you girls to join. We thought it would be good for you.”

“But when do you get to see him?” asked Lucilia.

“You mean all those nights your father’s busy with his slaves?” Valeria snickered.

Lucilia, though, was not amused.

“I could have sworn I saw you last night,” she said. “With Habilis.”

“Well, I suppose I might as well admit that it was me you saw. I figured it didn’t really matter now, anyway, what with the Senate’s decree. Who knows how much longer the group will be able to meet at all? Let alone in so many diverse places. I figured I might as well attend the one led by the high priestess, instead of one of the lesser groups headed by her subordinates. There’s always a clearer flow of information and news when Paculla’s in charge. I needed to know what was going out.”

“Why didn’t you make Habilis a freedman, then?” she asked. “If you’ve really cared about him all these years? He’s been reliable and trustworthy since I can remember. Surely he deserves his freedom by now.”

“Don’t you think I tried?” said Valeria. “But you know how Lucilius is—he thinks slaves are a direct reflection of status—the more he has, the more important he

thinks he is. Every time I broached the subject, he just said no and refused to discuss it. Besides, even if Lucilius hadn't needed his services as an accountant, don't you think Habilis would have wanted to stay anyway—if for no other reason than to be around me and his daughter?"

Lucilia reached over and set her empty glass on an end table. "But how did you know what was going on? I didn't see you, yet it must have been you who went to Paculla to tell her."

"Habilis came and got me as soon as Lucilius told him to leave the house. He was upset, but I think he was more worried for you than he was for himself. He kept saying that I had to do something and that he's made a huge mistake. Of course, he explained the entire situation with the letter to me, how Lucilius had seen it and lost his temper and was on a rampage, but I couldn't do much about that. I went directly to Paculla. I have little to fear from your father if I'm not in the house, so afterward I came with her here and have been upstairs ever since, worrying about what was going on. You're okay, though?" she asked, smoothing Lucilia's hair with the palm of her hand. "Neither Secunda nor Paculla would tell me what exactly was going on, just that they had sent people to get you. I was so worried!"

"Yes, fine. But . . . Wait! Secunda? The young girl? The girl who's supposed to be initiated? You know her?"

Valeria laughed. "Of course," she said. "She's one of Lucilius' personal assistants. I knew she was spying on you for him. And of course, I made sure to make a good impression on her because it never hurts to have the person spying on you on

your own side. She may tell him everything she hears, but she tells me, too. It wasn't hard to extrapolate his intentions toward you from her account of your recent activities. I was only mildly surprised to see her at the meeting, but I knew as soon as I saw her talking to you that I'd have to contact Paculla. It was Paculla who suggested we contact you, Sempronia. She said you'd know what to do, as usual."

"I don't understand, though," said Lucilia. "Why would Secunda betray her own master? Especially since she would have had to have known that such a betrayal would ultimately result in his plans being foiled."

Sempronia shook her head, a smile on her face.

"I suspect she's only as loyal to Lucilius as she has to be," Valeria said. "She doesn't want to get sold or punished, but I doubt very strongly that she wants to see you prosecuted for what she now knows is hardly a crime—merely mingling with people of different status and enjoying yourself doing so."

"I really hope you're right," said Lucilia. "She was a nice child. I'd like to think she wouldn't be so malicious."

"Anyway, the damage is done and Lucilius knows," said Valeria, squeezing Lucilia's hand in her own. "He probably still doesn't know about my participation in the cult, but he certainly knows about everything you've done in the past several weeks. That can't be rectified. Especially with Habilis' recent declaration. I wouldn't have told Habilis about Secunda had I known how he would react. He was furious to learn that Lucilius had been spying on you. When he knew his job was probably lost, I

truly believe his only concern was for making sure you knew that Lucilius wasn't your father—that your real father would never betray you in such a way.”

“What about Decia, though,” said Lucilia. “No one will tell me where she is or if she's safe. I have good reason to believe Lucilius turned her in but I'm not sure the Senate would even take him seriously, especially in light of all of this. Ulpius was his strongest connection, and now Ulpius knows everything. Lucilius was in a rage when we left.”

“I don't know where she is either, dear. But even if the family fortune is no longer intact, I think Lucilius' name might still be big enough to call in a favor or two if he really wanted,” said Valeria. “Try not to think about it until we know something definitive.”

“Oh please, Mother. A favor? I'd har—”

Cassius came staggering through the door then. Even from her sofa several yards away, Lucilia could see that he was bleeding freely from a gash across his forehead.

“Are you okay?” Sempronia asked, hurriedly rising to her feet and going over to assist him.

“Fine, fine,” Cassius gasped, brushing the back of his hand across his bleeding brow. “Is everyone safe here?”

“Yes, why?” asked Valeria. She looked around rapidly and rose to her feet, pacing back and forth and peering at all the shadows in the room.

“Ambushed,” he said. “Five of them, all gladiators*, and strong ones, too.”

“The Senate’s men, then?” asked Lucilia. “Did you find Decia?”

Cassius nodded in the direction from which he’d come. “She should be here soon. I left my companions with her and came on ahead to make sure everyone was safe here.” He looked around the room, seeing that Valeria and Sempronia were all right. Then he pulled away from Lucilia’s grasp and began to pace around the perimeter of the room, passing bookcases and frescoes, mosaics and rare roses and narcissi.

“Where exactly were you when they attacked?” asked Lucilia.

“Just ascending the Palatine, headed for the Curia.”

“Then the gladiators could have been hired by anyone . . .” Lucilia said.

“Unlikely,” Cassius interjected. “Who else has the money and authority to deputize gladiators as legionnaires, albeit temporary and completely disposable ones at that.”

“Ulpius,” said Sempronia, but she sounded dubious even as she spoke his name.

“Not likely,” said Lucilia. “He’d probably help me, if he knew how. I really don’t think he’d hire mercenaries to track me down, let alone to harass men whom he couldn’t possibly be sure were assisting me.”

“Well who else could know?” asked Sempronia. “I’m always very careful to keep my men from being recognized by anyone who poses a potential threat.”

“Yes. Except that Lucilius, and Ulpius, and several slaves at my home probably saw them when they came to ‘take me in for questioning’,” said Lucilia.

Sempronia shrugged, but bit her lip and said nothing else.

“Well, if you don’t believe it could have been Ulpius, that leaves only Lucilius,” said Cassius. “But what if you were being spied on?”

“Even if I were being spied on by Lucilius, where would he get that sort of money? Gladiators aren’t cheap,” Lucilia said, not mentioning Secunda.

“By someone in the Senate then?” asked Valeria.

Cassius continued pacing around the room, glancing at the closed door every few seconds.

Lucilia went to open the door to look out for Decia, but Cassius lunged toward her.

“Don’t open that! You don’t know who’s out there,” he said.

The three women exchanged a look.

“What do you mean, Cassius?” asked Sempronia. Her voice had lost all traces of its jovial cadence, increasing in its depth and severity.

Cassius wiped the back of his hand across his brow. Lucilia could see that it came away stained with blood and sweat.

“I don’t know. It just doesn’t seem safe,” he said, pacing back and forth in front of the door.

“I hope you didn’t lead anyone here,” said Sempronia.

Valeria was visibly shaking. Lucilia waited by the door, wishing she could open it but afraid of who might be outside.

Cassius came to a halt by the door, spreading his legs in a combative stance and resting his right hand on his sword. “Go ahead then,” he said. “Open it.” He drew his *gladius* as he spoke, gesturing at Lucilia with the blade and stepping to the side of the doorway.

Lucilia looked toward her mother, who nodded.

“Be brave,” Valeria said.

Lucilia reached for the door, but before she could open it, it came flying open seemingly of its own accord, jarring her hand before she had a chance to back far enough away to evade being hit by the swinging door.

Decia rushed in, followed closely by two men who Lucilia recognized from earlier that day as Cassius’s men. Decia and Lucilia met each other’s gaze for an instant before Decia flung herself onto Lucilia, bowling her over onto the floor.

Cassius hastily yanked his blade out of the way just before Decia would have impaled herself. He slammed the door closed behind the second man, placing a bar firmly across it.

Cassius nodded at Decia, but both women ignored his acknowledgement, embracing each other instead and kissing. Decia’s hair was a mess again; Lucilia did her best to straighten it, but it didn’t matter—she could have been bald and would still have been the most regal woman Lucilia had ever seen. Her face was flushed, but it only enhanced her features. There were beads of sweat dotting her upper lip. Lucilia recalled the night before—Decia had looked very much like this then as well; exertion

brought out a strength and beauty that Lucilia had only been able to imagine before meeting this remarkable woman.

Sempronia went back to the sofa where she'd been sitting before all the commotion, patting the cushion beside her, inviting Decia to sit. But again, both Lucilia and Decia ignored the gesture.

"I was so worried," muttered Decia, clutching Lucilia around the shoulders. She reminded Lucilia at once of a very small child and a very lonely adult.

Lucilia smiled as she kissed Decia's head, taking one of her hands in her own. Decia's palm was cool and smooth, yet firm and reassuring. "I was worried, too," said Lucilia. "I kept picturing you dead. I thought they'd caught you. What would I even do?"

Decia kissed Lucilia several more times. Sitting on top of her and clasping her hands in Lucilia's.

"I'm glad you're here now," Lucilia said, kissing Decia's hands. "No one would tell me where you were."

"I'm all right," said Decia. "But it was a close thing."

Meanwhile, the men told Cassius about losing Marcus Aebutius, their comrade, in the fight. Sempronia questioned the men about being followed, berating them for jeopardizing the location. They stood shamefacedly listening as she explained the need for caution and the possibility of spies knocking down the door as they spoke.

The two soldiers exchanged knowing glances and snickered at the women on the floor.

“This is hardly the time to have a reunion,” said Cassius, interrupting the women. “What if someone’s pursuing us as we speak? You may not be safe here, girls.”

“We’d better hurry up and get you on your way,” added Sempronia. “At this point, you’ve probably got a better chance of getting away if you flee rather than remain here.”

“Wait there and I’ll gather the traveling things. We leave immediately,” said Cassius.

Lucilia barely heard any of what Cassius had been saying. She had buried her face in Decia’s hair and was enjoying the feel of the curly tresses of silk fall over her cheek, the musty smell of exertion, not unlike the smell of the nights they’d been together, the softness of the neck under the hair, covered in its own velvety fuzz. Decia was running her hands through Lucilia’s own hair when Cassius came back with bags and travel flasks.

8

Day 2: Nighttime

Each person carried her own pack. Everyone wore a disguise despite the darkness of the streets. Sempronia had cautioned them that it was impossible to be too careful, especially now that they suspected someone was spying on them. Decia and Lucilia walked side by side behind Cassius, with Valeria behind them, and the final two men following close on her heels. Cassius had told Lucilia that they would be traveling through the Subura, a section of Rome that was overrun with foreigners and the impoverished masses, runaway slaves and harlots, con artists and mercenaries. Here, he had warned her, Lucilia should be leery of anyone who drew near to her, as one could never tell whether it were a citizen down on his luck or a pickpocket approaching—or worse.

Lucilia was familiar with almost nothing they passed; Lucilius had always been strict about her wanderings. Once, when she and Decia had been adolescents, they had snuck out. But they hadn't made it much further than the Argiletum, a street of booksellers and other vendors of upper-class wares that ran from the Forum all the way down through the Subura, before it began to grow dark out and they had hurried back to their neighborhood, fearful of being lost in the *urbs* at night. Those had been happy times, though. She'd been carefree, too young yet to marry and not mature enough to concern herself over the family's financial situation. For a moment, she was nostalgic for her childhood—at least until she remembered all the times Lucilius had openly shamed her mother by bringing girls, little better than courtesans, into the

household, ostensibly to serve as helpmates to her mother. But the only thing any of them had ever helped her mother out of was Lucilius' attentions. No, there was nothing to miss about a youth full of her mother's spiteful allegations of adultery and Lucilius' bitter reprisals.

Lucilia shivered, wrapping her cloak more snugly under her chin. The night was chill, despite the coming of spring. She hoped it wouldn't get much colder, or she was sure her feet would freeze in the thin, decorative leather that comprised her traveling boots. With effort, it wasn't so difficult to ignore the cold metal of the knife tucked into her right boot cuff. She wasn't sure what good it would do her—but Cassius had insisted that all the women take some form of protection with them, in the event something should happen to him or the other two men.

"Decia," she hissed, trying to keep her voice down so as not to attract attention. "When are you going to tell me what happened?" she asked, snatching Decia's hand and squeezing it. "Lucilius denounced me; he says I'm Habilis' child. He can't hurt you anymore. Just tell me what happened."

"Thank the gods," Decia said, somehow managing an even quieter tone than Lucilia had used. "That man isn't worthy of the name *pater*. How'd he find out, though? You're mother's too smart to have let it get out that she'd committed adultery."

"There was a letter," hissed Lucilia. "From Habilis."

"Oh," said Decia, laughing quietly. "So that's who it is then. You know, I'd always suspected that something was going on between the two of them. You

remember that one time we were in your father's study, and Habilis was teaching us about triangles? She came in,"

"And wanted to know if he would come help her move some furniture around."

"In her bedroom," said Decia, laughing again. "Really, it's cute. The poor woman must be distraught now that we can't find him!"

"Quit trying to distract me, Deci. I want to know what happened the other night."

"I'll tell you when we stop for the night," said Decia, kicking the paving stones as she walked.

Lucilia was silent for a few moments, listening to the scratching of Decia's shoes, the barely audible plod of the others' feet on cobblestones as they traveled through the street, and the disturbingly loud sound of her pants swishing; she recognized the need for a disguise, but she had never worn anything but a tunic, that had merely increased in length as she aged to uphold chastity's requirements. She did have to admit that the pants were not as uncomfortable as she had always assumed.

"Are you sure you won't tell me now—" Lucilia asked again.

"Fine," said Decia, sighing audibly. "But keep your voice down; I don't want everyone else hearing us."

Lucilia nodded.

"That night, I went to see your father before I left, so he would send someone with me. Instead of just calling a slave to go with me, though, he said he'd go himself.

Durius was with him and accompanied us out of your house. Neither of them were friendly, but at first they were polite. Your father asked about my father's household affairs and what my mother was doing to keep herself occupied lately. Then, he started talking about you. Asking me if I knew why you were so stubborn about the marriage and why you weren't more grateful. At first, I told him I didn't know, but when he started saying that he thought it was because you were involved in illicit activity—he thought you were sleeping around—I had to tell him that I thought maybe you just weren't very happy to have the choice made for you. He didn't much care for that, though—called it an excuse. So I said maybe you weren't interested in a guy who was at least a decade older than you; he didn't care about that either. Finally, I told him that maybe you didn't find any men very appealing. He didn't seem to understand. He kept insisting that you were up to something bad. He didn't explicitly say anything about the cult, but I knew that was what he was thinking, especially after that long discussion at dinner. So I told him that I thought you cared about me more than you did about Ulpius, and that I cared about you as well."

"What else did he say?" asked Lucilia. In the darkness, all Lucilia could see of Decia were her gleaming eyes. She tripped on an uneven cobblestone, trying to decipher Decia's mood by the strange brightness of her eyes. She almost looked feverish. Catching her balance, she took hold of Decia's arm and squeezed it in reassurance. "Come on, you can tell me. It won't matter now anyway."

"I suppose you're right," said Decia, squeezing Lucilia's arm in return.

"Durius really started the whole thing. Lucilius told him that I wasn't a very good

influence—his daughter shouldn't be hanging around someone who would get her into any trouble, who would prevent her from making a good match. He asked Durius . . . what happened to troublemakers who interfered with his ambitions. Durius just grinned. Jupiter, that grin! I'll never forget it. It was toothy and full of every evil thought without any hint of mercy." Decia paused.

"Well, what happened then?" said Lucilia, accidentally bumping into Decia as they walked. The scent of her hair was as alluring as ever, despite their impromptu voyage.

"Lucilius told me that I'd better stay away from you. I told him that you didn't want that; it would make you miserable. He said he didn't see how the loss of one useless friend could make his daughter miserable. I reminded him about our feelings for each other, but I wasn't sure he understood. At least not until later—now I know he had to have understood. But he just kept telling me, in that simultaneously commanding and wheedling tone he gets, to stay away from you or else. I said, 'or else what?', but it was a long time before he would say anything else. And when he did, his words were in the shape of Durius's fists. It was he, Durius, who started the whole thing, but Lucilius didn't do anything to prevent or stop it. No, he just stood there until Durius had hit me enough to wear me down; then Durius tied me hands behind my back and knocked me to the ground. The whole time Lucilius kept saying what a bad influence I was, to have corrupted his beloved child and ruined her prospects. He kept saying what a sorry excuse for a woman I had turned out to be."

“Decia, you should have told me!” said Lucilia, struggling to keep her voice low.

“I’m not finished,” said Decia. “They dragged me into the shadows between two buildings—I think it was the baker’s and that doctor’s office—and then they took turns. Right there, in the middle of the alley. I couldn’t do anything about it. While the one was on top of me, the other held my head up, a dagger to my neck. If I screamed, they said they’d kill me. Who would miss me, they asked. They said you’d be better off without me. Several people passed, I could hear their footsteps, but no one noticed that I was being attacked and I was too afraid to scream. Compared to the opulence of Lucilius and his minion, I probably looked the slave anyway, but no one even came near. That bastard knew he’d be able to get away with it.”

Lucilia was silent.

“What are you girls talking about up there? You aren’t arguing, are you? Now, I know this is a very stressful situation—“

“No mother, we aren’t fighting,” said Lucilia. “We’re just talking. Don’t mind us.”

“Right,” said Valeria.

Lucilia wasn’t sure she was going to let the subject go, but a moment later she heard the whispered conversation resume behind her.

After several more minutes, Decia spoke again, “The entire ordeal lasted maybe an hour. It was an eternity. Then they just walked away. I guess they went back to your house where Lucilius must have lain in wait for you to get home. I didn’t want

to tell you—to shame you—that your father was such a bad man. Even if you’d believed me, it might have distanced you. I don’t want that. Ever.”

“Oh, Decia.” Lucilia was too stunned to cry or even feel very angry. There was only a sharp and hollow pit in her stomach that had been expanding the entire time Decia had been talking.

“I know,” said Decia.

“Did you tell your father? Your brothers?” asked Lucilia.

“The thought had crossed my mind, but honestly, what power would any of them have over Lucilius in the law court? Even if Lucilius is less financially powerful than his family once was, he’s still an aristocrat, a noble, from a long line of noble-born fathers. I really doubt anything would have come of it. And even if it did, the recompense would go to my father, and nothing would be done for me since they consider it more a violence to the male relative than to the actual woman who was injured.” Decia spat audibly on the ground. “They’re all a bunch of pigs.”

“Yes, but Decia, they raped you. They hurt you. You can’t just let them walk away from that, like it doesn’t matter. That’s the same as admitting that it didn’t hurt you.”

“I know,” said Decia, “but I can’t go against the customs and ideals of the whole country by myself. They’d take one look at me, one inquiry into my past, and say I had it coming.”

“You have to do something,” insisted Lucilia. “Even a slave shouldn’t have to endure such a violation.”

Decia didn't answer her, and they walked in silence for several long moments, Lucilia cherishing the comfort of Decia's arm in her own.

"Surely your brothers, if you told them, would be able to do something about it . . ." said Lucilia, unwilling to drop the subject.

"I know where you're going with that train of thought, Lucilia, but I won't put them up to it. They get into enough trouble on their own without me inciting them into attacking a noble. They're just infantrymen—what defense would there be for them if they were caught?"

"I guess that's true," said Lucilia, "but it still seems like they have a right to know that their baby sister has been attacked. You may not see them as much now that they're out of the house, but that's no reason to think they care any less for you. You're still their favorite baby sister. I've always envied you that."

Decia laughed quietly. "Envied me what? All the years of their teasing and roughhousing? A lot of good all that play-fighting did me—I couldn't even defend myself against a slave and an old man."

"They wouldn't have treated you like one of them if they hadn't been so fond of you. Yes, I envy that. I've always been treated as some exotic commodity, only good for what it can bring in at the market. But you? They actually care about you, and your parents, too."

"Oh, but don't forget about Habilis," said Decia. "In a lot of ways, he's more faithful and protective of you than my entire family combined. Everyone knows that he could have been a freedman years ago, had he truly desired it. He stayed for you."

“For me and my mother,” said Lucilia.

“For his family,” said Decia.

Decia and Lucilia fell silent, walking carefully through the streets behind Cassius. Lucilia wondered how exactly it was that Decia had been caught so off-guard. Her friend was more than able to take care of herself. It was a slight of Lucilius on her up-bringing that he always offered to send someone with her to protect her on her way home—as if she needed protecting, as if he didn’t believe that any woman could be a decent fighter, even if she did have military brothers who had let her practice with them when she was young. She didn’t want to ask, though, trying to imagine how anyone could react to such a situation in a positive way. It was inconceivable.

From the whispers behind her, Lucilia figured the two soldiers had engaged Valeria in some conversation. The tone occasional grew heated. Lucilia wondered what sort of thing they could be arguing about, but the only word she could ever make out was ‘dinner’, and even that was mentioned loud enough for her to hear only twice. Her own stomach was rumbling, so she hoped that Cassius would find somewhere for them to stop and rest their feet, eat a bite of food, maybe have a drink soon.

As they approached the *Porta Ostiensis**, along the *Via Ostiensis**, the number of people on the streets multiplied. Despite Lucilia’s best efforts to appear as no more than a mere slave girl, on her way to be bought or sold somewhere where the legislation was less strict, she still noticed many people giving her and Decia suspicious looks. She hoped it was just because of the sheerness of the fabric of her pants and not because they suspected anything was out of the ordinary. Cassius had

assured them that this was the least conspicuous route to the dockside street, where they'd be able to board a ship and leave Rome. He said that Sempronia had already arranged the trip, that they'd be safely resituated in Hispania in a matter of months, and that nothing would go wrong as long as they hurried and didn't draw attention to themselves—hence their ridiculous disguises. Lucilia was dubious, though. If they'd taken a more direct route, they'd have been there already. Walking in circles seemed like an unnecessary way to deflect detection.

“Excuse me,” said a man, standing by the side of a stone building little larger than a hut. His hair was black and greasy; it didn't seem to have been cut in years. He was at least a head taller than Cassius, and with a network of badly healed scars covering his huge, bare chest, he looked the worse for his seemingly young age. Lucilia doubted he was older than thirty.

The men behind Lucilia fell silent at the stranger's hail.

Cassius glared at the man, taking up a menacing stance with his hands on his hips and his feet spread firmly on the ground. “What?” he said.

Just then, three more men appeared from around the building, flanking the first on all sides.

“What's your business?” asked the lead man, running a plump hand through hair shiny and lank with grease.

“I could ask the same of you,” countered Cassius, maintaining his glare and casting it onto the three newcomers.

“I asked first,” said the man. “But more importantly, the Senate wants to know.”

Cassius shot a glance over his shoulder at Lucilia and Decia, and Valeria behind them. His two soldiers standing near Lucilia shuffled their feet, cocking their heads, almost in unison, to the side, as if expecting a command to come out of thin air.

“Hah, the Roman Senate,” said Cassius. “What rubbish. And I suppose next you’ll tell me that the Senate needs my coin purse to feed its elderly mother?” He spat on the ground, glaring at the man.

The man reached for a pouch tied by his belt, pulling a thin tube from the band and unfurling a long scroll. At the bottom, Lucilia could see all too clearly the insignia of the Roman Senate. She swallowed hard and took a step backward, accidentally bumping into her mother.

“Anyone can make a passing forgery of that,” scoffed Cassius. But it seemed to Lucilia that some of the bravado had evaporated from his voice.

“Now, I only want the three women, but if you continue to aid them in their flight from justice, I’ll be forced to apprehend you and your men as well,” the man said, taking a step nearer to Cassius and brandishing the scroll like a magical wand.

Cassius glanced over his shoulder at his two remaining soldiers. He winked precociously. The two men immediately drew their swords, raising them into defensive postures. They both took a few steps forward, positioning themselves in front of the three women.

Decia was quicker, though. Before Lucilia even noticed she had gone from her side, Decia sprung forward, brandishing a long dagger under the nose of the enemy nearest to her. Instead of fighting back, he laughed and took a step backward. Decia, though, advanced and thrust the dagger swiftly from his nose to his ribcage and through his chest, piercing a lung before he could cry out. The man gurgled a few times, blood oozing from between his lips, before collapsing onto the ground. The entire incident had taken less time than it took Lucilia to comprehend the severity of the situation.

“Fucking eunuchs!*” shouted Decia, stopping to wipe her dagger clean on the felled man’s tunic. She kicked him once in his face after she had stood back up.

Lucilia was horrified at first, but then burst into laughter at Decia’s customary casual manner, even in the face of murder.

“What a woman,” said one of Cassius’s men, giving Decia an appraising look as if it were the first time he’d ever seen her.

The opposing three men were too stunned to move though. Lucilia figured that they were surprised to see a woman with such fighting skills, let alone the courage to use them when outnumbered. Decia was lucky to have grown up with brothers. Cassius’s men, though, were used to such things.

“Well, come on,” said Lucilia, shrugging off her bemusement and tugging a much smaller version of Decia’s blade from her boot cuff.

Valeria glanced at her daughter for a long minute, then followed suit, pulling a knife from her own boot. Cassius' two remaining men rallied around Decia and took up stances flanking her on either side.

Cassius arched an eyebrow at the leader of the men, nodding his head to the left in the direction of the dead man's body. "Well, are you still going to demand that I hand them over?"

The other man, instead of answering, raised his right arm, dropping it in a chopping motion. His two cronies sprang at the signal, rushing on the three women.

Lucilia managed a few desperate jabs against the beady-eyed giant who was attacking her, one to a rib and another to the soft flesh beneath an eye, but ultimately, she succumbed to the mass of the man who had tackled her. Looking around frantically for someone who could assist her, she saw that Valeria was faring better, slicing her assailer's wrist clear through to the bone, rendering his fighting arm useless. She was able to fend off his one-armed attempts with a few parries from her blade, and with her help, Cassius was able to advance close enough to him to bash him over the head with his sword hilt. The man toppled to the ground, his head bleeding profusely from a crack in his skull. Cassius and Valeria, though, were too absorbed in the action to notice Lucilia's predicament.

Lucilia clawed the man pressing down on top of her, trying to move his weight off her so she could squirm into a better position to attack him, but he was too heavy; she remained pinned to the cobblestones, looking on helplessly as her friends were beset on all sides.

“Be still,” the fat man said, yanking a strand of Lucilia’s hair. “I have orders to take you in alive. If you cooperate now, I may let your friends escape.”

Lucilia tried to return a sharp retort, but she was unable to speak for the weight of the man pressing her chest into the ground. All she could manage was an angry whimper that ended in a wheeze. She looked on helplessly at the small window of activity she could see from her position. The leader of the men, though Decia had started out strong, quickly overcame her. Lucilia saw her take a nasty slash to the upper thigh. In the next instant, the force of his short sword being brought down to parry Decia’s own, much slighter blade, threw her off balance, dropping her to one knee. Maintaining her grip on her blade, Decia rose quickly into a defensive crouch, facing her assailant. Lucilia saw them circle each other once, but then they moved out of her line of sight and she was left listening to the sounds of scuffling feet on the cobblestones and the ringing of blades. Suddenly, Lucilia heard a loud clatter. Realizing someone’s blade had fallen, she squirmed frantically to see whose it had been, but to no avail; the enormous weight pinning her to the ground didn’t budge. She heard a muffled cry—and she knew what she didn’t wish to know—and she felt the cold blade enter her own breast. “Decia!” she gasped, straining even harder against the man.

By now, there was a large group of spectators watching the fight. Lucilia was penned, but the man wasn’t doing anything to hurt her, merely restraining her on the ground. Maybe he had been telling the truth about taking her alive—not that she’d stay that way long if they tried her for conspiracy.

“Get off her,” said Cassius, coming to stand near the fat man.

“Or what?” the man asked. “You’ll run me through like you did my comrades? In front of this crowd? You’ll be a wanted criminal.”

“No!” shrieked Lucilia, “Go help Decia! I saw her weapon fall.”

Lucilia could not tell what Cassius’s reaction was, either to the man’s words or her own, but the next thing she knew, the weight was tumbling off of her and she was being helped to her feet by her mother.

“Come on, dear,” Valeria whispered, pulling Lucilia to her feet when she did not respond quickly enough. “We have to get out of here.”

“What about Decia?” Lucilia mumbled, hearing herself as if the voice were coming from far away. “We can’t leave her.”

“There’s nothing we can do for her now,” said Cassius, taking Lucilia’s free arm and helping to drag her away from the street into a back alley where a means of escape would be more likely to present itself. “I tried, but she was injured badly, and when I went to help her up, she fell again. See for yourself, if you want.” He pointed to the middle of the road.

Lucilia’s eyes followed the trajectory from his pointing finger. There, in the middle of the road, lying motionless and covered in blood was a body. Decia’s body.

“It can’t be,” Lucilia said. She took a shuddering breath. Her chest hurt. She wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn’t come. It didn’t seem real, despite the evidence that was plainly before her eyes.

“She stopped breathing in my arms,” said Valeria, smoothing a hand over Lucilia’s cheek.

Lucilia made to go to her fallen lover, but Cassius intercepted her, restraining her with his strong arms. “I’m sorry, but you can’t,” he said. “Look around. There are too many people who may turn hostile at any time. And I’m sure there would have been more of them than that; the rest are probably waiting for word of whether these assailants succeeded. Please, just come along now. We have to be off.”

“This is all your fault,” Lucilia said to Cassius. She stared blankly ahead as he and her mother hurried her away from the crowded block, his single remaining soldier was picking himself up from the ground and heading after them.

Lucilia didn’t protest again until they found a safe place to pass the night. It was a small house, not more than fifteen minutes’ walk from the intersection where the fight had taken place, but they had passed through enough twists and turns that it was highly unlikely anyone would find them. There had been no one at the door to answer when they knocked, but a peeling wooden sign hanging above the entryway clearly marked the building as ‘Celer’s Inn: Food, Beds, Supplies,’ so the group had let themselves in. Still seeing no one inside, they were discussing what they should do—stay or try to find somewhere else to hide out—when Lucilia began pacing erratically back and forth, shuffling her feet across the concrete floor.

“What happened to Decia?” Lucilia asked, turning toward Cassius.

Cassius looked away from her.

“Mother,” she said, turning around abruptly to face Valeria. “How?”

“Baby,” Valeria said, “she’s gone. Would it really make it any better if there were some explanation?”

Lucilia didn’t understand. She had seen Decia. Cassius had brought her back from the investigation, had brought her to Sempronia’s, and had reunited them. Then she recalled Decia, arm covered in someone else’s blood, knife dripping in her hand, eyes flashing as she fought against men who would rob her of her freedom, of her life.

“What happened,” she said again, turning to Cassius for clarification. “Where is she? And what happened to the other two who were with us.”

“Them?” he said, “One was torn up by the mob. Varius is okay. Here, drink this,” said Cassius, handing her his own personal flask of wine.

“Cassius, you tell me what happened to her.” Lucilia took a long pull from the flask, but didn’t stop pacing. The wine didn’t settle her mind.

“I’m not sure. She was doing well at first. I think she was cornered and disarmed.” Cassius crossed his arms over his chest, refusing to take back his flask of uncut wine.

“I saw that, but she looked as able as ever. I saw her upright and in fighting posture,” said Lucilia. “Even after she was disarmed.”

“I know,” said Cassius. “But you have to think, she had no weapon, and the man who brought her down probably at least had his gladius out. He was obviously much larger and more experienced.”

“A lot of good you were,” said Lucilia. She paused to sip from the leather flask again. “Did you know that both of her brothers are soldiers? Real infantrymen who are working their way toward centurion posts?”

She took a few more drinks from the flask and tried to hand it back. But Cassius wouldn’t accept it. She rested the flask in her lap, only then noticing how torn her pants had gotten in the scuffle. Even where there was still cloth, it was soiled from the street.

“Playing soldier is a lot different than actually being one,” said Cassius.

“You’re sure, though?” Lucilia asked. “There’s no way she . . .”

“No,” said Valeria and Cassius simultaneously. “We’re sure. I checked,” her mother added. “Baby, come here,” she said, extending her arms outward to embrace her daughter.

Lucilia held her breath. For as long as she could, she held her breath. She didn’t accept her mother’s comfort. She didn’t need to be coddled like a child. Decia was always tough; she could be tough, too.

“What now?” she asked finally, taking a deep breath, trying to hide the rapid beating of her heart. Her chest felt like it couldn’t contain the beating any longer.

“Now, we sleep,” said Cassius. “In the morning, we try to get out of this city. I think it’s still advisable to try to meet our contact in the shipping yard. The further we can get you from the allegations, from the crime, from people who might know you, or know your name, the safer you’ll be.”

Unbidden, tears began slipping from Lucilia's eyes. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't make them stop. She didn't care that Cassius wouldn't tell them who their contact was, or how much further they had to go to meet up with this mysterious purveyor of ships. She didn't even care where they ended up going at this point. Hispania, Gaul, Anywhere so long as there wouldn't be memories of Decia to mock her.

Despite her anguish, she pulled her knapsack onto the pallet and began digging through its contents. In the dim candlelight, it was difficult to see what she was doing. She kept sifting through items, though, down past a comb, several scrolls, a bottle of perfume that her mother had given to her a year ago, a feather she'd found on a beach when she was a child, and finally, her sketchbook. It was her most precious possession—expensive beyond belief and impractical. The row Lucilius had put up over her desire to draw had been particularly nasty; he had ended up slapping both she and her mother, telling them no, refusing to discuss it further. To this day, Lucilia didn't know where her mother had come up with the money for the item. It was a collection of papyrus, bound with hemp cords in three places. More than half of it was full of sketches. By candlelight, she flipped past pictures of her mother, her friends, the family, images of fruit and trees, the occasional building. And throughout, recurring sketches of Decia—as a child, as a young woman, as an adult. Finally, she found the one she sought: Decia, defiantly poised, head tilted back, eyes angry and loving, hair flowing around her shoulders in waves. Decia, on the day she had convinced her father not to marry her off for political gain. Decia, triumphant. She

clutched the image to her breast and snuggled back under the blanket, thankful now that she had chosen to carry the bulky sketchbook.

9

Day 3: Morning

Lucilia awoke in a room flooded with the pink light of dawn. Momentarily ignorant of the events of the previous night, she looked around, expecting to see Decia. As sleep faded from her eyes, though, she saw her mother asleep in the bed next to her, noticed Cassius across the room in another bed, and on the floor in between was one of his entourage. And as she looked around, a dull dread began to creep into her spirit. She recalled Decia's death, and the anguish of lost love, lost opportunity for overcoming their situation, all raining down on her in a torrent. She sobbed, stifling her sorrow in her pillow to avoid waking the others. The part of her that knew she had to regain control and deal with what came next seemed far away—her heart was being torn from her breast every second.

Cassius stirred and rolled over.

"How are you this morning?" he asked her in a hushed tone, rising and coming over to stand by her bed. His hair was a mess, despite being barely longer than an inch.

Lucilia looked up at him, her eyes swollen from crying and burning with a dry sting. He'd had time to change into a fresh tunic the night before. It was white and looked freshly pressed. He was only wearing his cuirass. The rest of his armor must have been stashed under his mattress. She looked away from his piercing gaze, turning her head in an exaggerated fashion to avoid making eye contact.

Cassius heaved a sigh and began to turn around. But he halted mid-step and swung back to face her.

“It won’t get better if you don’t talk about it,” he said. “But I know it’s hard. The first death always is.”

“You’re right,” said Lucilia, “It won’t get better.” She didn’t look at him again.

She was dimly aware that he had wandered out of the room, and wondered if she should follow. She wasn’t hungry, but the hollow pit in her stomach told her that she should eat, if only a plain slice of bread.

Lucilia carefully pushed back the covers and rose from the bed, cautious not to wake her mother. When the cold air of the room hit her legs, she realized she was still wearing her tattered disguise from the night before. She looked around to see if there were anything she could change into, but seeing nothing, she assumed Cassius must still have all the extra clothes packed away in his knapsack. She sighed as she wrapped her bed sheets around her body and headed out of the room by the same door Cassius had just gone through, regretting agreeing to the plan to organize the knapsacks by category of contents.

The connecting room was bathed in a similarly pink hue, but was set with trappings of an eatery, rather than of an inn. There were tables, couches, and even a few benches with no apparent eating surface, all arranged in the middle of a room not much bigger than Lucilia’s own dining room, but adorned with festive images of Priapus and several detailed reliefs of nymphs being chased around a shadowy forest by what could only have been a young Bacchus figure. The portrayal itself was an

ignorant over-simplification, but Lucilia was glad to see vestiges of her faith. Cassius was sitting near the door where they had come in from, ostensibly to watch over Valeria and the remaining soldier as they slept in the adjoining bedchamber. She sat at a table, positioning herself to face away from him.

Lucilia looked around for someone from whom she could inquire about food but saw no one. Cassius, however, seemed content. She wondered if she should ask him about breakfast, but she didn't think she was ready to talk to him.

"It wasn't right to leave Decia there like that," Lucilia said, "even if she was as good as dead."

Cassius cleared his throat. "I did all I could while still protecting you and your mother," he said. "If you want something to eat, you'll have to go into the kitchen and tell Marcella. She should be back there fixing my breakfast as we speak. As I understand it, she's the eldest daughter of the proprietor."

"Thank you," Lucilia said, clipping the words short. *Marcella, she knew that name. But it had to be a coincidence.*

She rose and headed toward a wooden gate across the room from her. Now that she was looking, she could clearly see a young girl with dark hair busy over a cooking fire. The gate swung easily at her touch, and Lucilia entered the hot kitchen.

"Excuse me," she said, loudly enough to be heard over the crackling flames of the open fire.

The girl's head snapped up, and she raised an eyebrow in Lucilia's direction. Lucilia coughed. "You!" she exclaimed, surprised to see her father's former slave in a

kitchen on the other side of town. “What are you doing here?” She kept her voice low so Cassius wouldn’t hear their conversation.

“Something to eat?” Marcella asked, never taking her eyes off Lucilia. “Be quiet about it,” she hissed. “He doesn’t know. I’ve only just escaped this morning. The cook sent me to fetch eggs and I just kept walking.”

“Yes,” said Lucilia, observing the stark, white walls, stained yellow-brown at the top from all the smoke. “The same as he’s having will be fine,” she said, gesturing toward where Cassius was seated. “You must be terrified! Poor girl. Is this the home of your family, then?”

“Sure, ma’am,” said the girl, appearing to tend the eggs she was cooking in an iron skillet. “It is, or was. My uncle’s in charge now.”

Lucilia could see from where she was standing that some of them were burnt. But burnt eggs were better than nothing, so she made no comment.

“I’m sorry,” Lucilia said, patting the girl gently on the arm. “I’ll find you before we leave. Maybe you can go with us.”

“But where are you going?” asked Marcella.

“Sh,” said Lucilia, backing out of the small kitchen.

Lucilia returned to her seat in the main room. She turned her chair about to face Cassius, though she made no other reparations.

“It’s all right,” said Cassius, looking at her for a long moment. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Lucilia swallowed hard.

Valeria peered through the door, then, and stepped fully into the dining room when she saw that there was no one else within the room.

“What smells good?” she asked, her tone light-hearted and jovial, as though they were old friends about to share breakfast, with not a care in the world.

“Eggs and . . . ?” said Lucilia.

“Fried fish,” supplied Cassius. “It’s what they had,” he said when Lucilia made a very grim face. “And anyway, it might be heavier than we’re used to, but we might need the heavy meal later. Who knows what the day has in store for us.”

“Eggs and fish it is,” said Valeria, winking at Lucilia. She went over to the gate and stuck her head past it, repeating almost word-for-word the exchange Lucilia had just had with Marcella.

Valeria chose a seat beside her daughter, patting her on the head as she sat down. Cassius and Valeria tried to make small talk about everything from the weather to the bedding, but Lucilia’s utter refusal to participate in any conversations finally silenced them when she turned a furious glare on her mother. Cassius kept casting glances over Lucilia’s shoulder, in the direction of the kitchen. Lucilia assumed he was merely hungry.

“Do you think she’s watching us?” Cassius asked, keeping his voice low.

Lucilia cocked her head to one side, and looked at her mother, but both women merely shrugged as if to suggest it didn’t much matter either way.

“Why?” asked Valeria.

“This place gives me a bad feeling,” said Cassius. “One girl, all alone. No one else. Doesn’t that strike you as suspicious?”

Valeria shrugged; Lucilia knew her mother didn’t have a lot of experience with inns.

After a few more minutes, Marcella came striding confidently out of the kitchen, three plates balanced gracefully on one arm, a pitcher, and stack of goblets in the other. She set them all at Lucilia’s table, and then announced grandly that their sum would equal several *asses* and a good word in any reputable household they happened to come across.

Valeria laughed, but agreed that it would be as the girl asked. Cassius rose, handed her the money, and came to sit beside Valeria.

Once Marcella had gone, they ate their food in the same silence that had reigned before. The only sound in the room was the sound of teeth chewing. Occasionally, someone would ask for the pitcher of water to be passed. Lucilia noted Cassius peering behind her every few minutes, even in the middle of a bite.

“I’m still troubled about how they managed to find us,” said Cassius. “We took a lot of precautions just to be recognized and attacked. The disguises should have worked.”

“I guess,” said Valeria, scowling down at her untouched fish. “But you have to remember that there are spies, and who knows where or when we’ll encounter them, or if we’ll encounter them at all. But it seems fairly obvious to me that someone must

have been watching us, or they wouldn't have known that we'd be disguised, or the number of us who would be traveling together."

"I agree," said Lucilia, poking her eggs with her fork, the sight and smell of the fish made her nauseous. "What happened to your other soldier? What was his name—Gaius?"

"He didn't make it," said Cassius, meeting Lucilia's gaze and not flinching. "It happens that way when you earn your sustenance fighting. We're trained to be prepared for whatever happens. He was overwhelmed by a better swordsman—it happens."

"I see," said Lucilia. She frowned and turned her attention back to her food.

"It's a rational attitude, dear," said Valeria. "Soldiers have to keep things in perspective in order to not lose their commitment when it counts. Fear or anxiety would only be a hindrance to a soldier."

Lucilia chewed a bite of her eggs, leaving the slimy fish chunks intact in their bay leaves. She gave the fish another grimace, then rose from the table and returned to bed. She flung the covers over her head and willed herself back to sleep, trying to shut down her mind and delay the rampant emotions from taking over again.

"Is there breakfast," mumbled the remaining soldier, still wrapped up in a coarse blanket on the floor. Now that Lucilia took the time to pay attention to him, she noticed that he was very attractive in his own right—even for a man. She immediately blushed; she shouldn't think such thoughts, especially not after Decia's death.

“Yes. Just go tell the kitchen girl what you want and she’ll make it for you,” said Lucilia. “I hear there’s only fish and eggs, though.”

“Thanks,” said the man, rising and heading out of the room. Before he exited, though, he turned back to her. “I’m sorry about your friend,” he said. He really did have a nice physique, Lucilia noted.

“I’m sorry about yours,” she said, gritting her teeth against the tears that threatened to prevent her from speaking.

“It happens. Gaius was a good man, a good soldier.” With that, he went out of the room.

Lucilia lay still for many minutes, listening to the clank of silverware and the knocking of cups and pitchers colliding with the table at almost rhythmic intervals. She wanted to go back to sleep so bad, but every time she nodded off a different image of Decia would appear before her eyes, startling her into wakefulness. Every time she thought the room had grown silent enough for her to doze off, she would think she heard Decia’s voice, whimpering as her life flew from her body. She was trying to convince herself that she was sinking into her mattress, trying to coax her exhausted psyche into sleep, when a loud crashing at the door to the street startled her. She snapped the covers back, staring wide-eyed at the wooden door, watching as it burst in on itself, admitting a very large, very muscular man.

“I’ll be!” he exclaimed, “She said it was you, but I didn’t believe her. I had to see for myself.”

Lucilia didn't know what to say. The man must be raving, possibly drunken. His tunic was a hideous shade of green. It was obviously squeezing his fat within its folds. She could see the lumps along his sides where he didn't quite fit into the measurements of the toga. His face was red, probably from drinking.

"Speak up, then," he said, coming closer.

His voice was loud and Lucilia silently willed her comrades to hear him and come back.

"Who do you mean?" Lucilia asked when it was apparent that no one had heard him.

"That priestess girl. You know, the one the Senate's after. Paculla."

Lucilia sighed; she was so sick of everyone constantly trying to persecute her. "I'm no such person," she said, struggling to keep the anger from her voice.

"Oh, really? You look like her. Dark hair, dark eyes, short."

"That describes nearly every Roman citizen of the female persuasion," Lucilia snapped, not daring to point out that it did not describe Paculla.

"Maybe, but every Roman wench isn't hiding out in my house—you are," he said, taking another step toward her. "I hear you arrived pretty late last night. What was a pretty girl such as yourself doing wandering the streets at night? Can't have been up to any good, I say. Now, if you come along quietly, I'll not harm you."

An ugly gash, running horizontally under his nose like a mustache, but bright pink and protuberant, wiggled as he spoke, making his menacing words almost humorous. He took a wobbling step toward where Lucilia was half-buried in blankets.

“Cassius!” Lucilia screamed. But she didn’t wait for him to come dashing from the other room. Before his name was all the way past her lips, she was rolling to the other side of bed. She leapt to her feet and snatched up a gladius that she vaguely remembered the man called Gaius wielding the night before. Brandishing the short sword out in front of her, she backed cautiously toward the edge of the room.

The man laughed at her clumsy handling of the blade when she almost lost her grip on the hilt, laughed so hard he doubled over clutching his stomach.

“If you let us leave, I’ll not harm you,” said Lucilia, looking warily toward the door to the dining room.

“I don’t think so,” the man said, chuckling again. “There’s a 100,000 *as* reward for information leading to your detainment. That’s a whole lot of money.”

“You’re lying,” said Lucilia, waving the gladius more energetically in an effort to halt the approaching man.

“Why would I lie?” he asked, laughing again. “The *quaestors* are desperate to put an end to your sort of nonsense once and for all. I bet they’d pay more than that if I waited another week or so to turn you in. This is just too convenient.”

Lucilia herself took a step forward then, holding the blade more firmly now. “I said, if you let us go, you won’t be harmed,” she said again, forcing herself to smile at him.

He lunged toward her, grasping for her arms with his free hand and waving his own blade in the other. But before he even made it near her, Cassius was vaulting

through the door. He intercepted the burly man with his own blade, plunging it hilt deep in the stranger's stomach and dragging it in a vicious ellipsis, gutting the fat man.

There was a shriek from the doorway. Lucilia turned to look and saw the figure of Marcella right on the other side of the door, gaping in horror at the man who was unmoving and bleeding on the floor at Cassius' feet. Cassius himself was cleaning his blade on the man's already filthy tunic.

"Girl," he said to Marcella, "did you know that your father was going to betray us?" His voice was very low, almost a growl. "Come here," he snapped, as she backed away from the room.

"Uncle," said Marcella, correcting Cassius.

"He'd been warned of our presence by someone," interjected Lucilia. "Who else could it have been but her?" How could she have been so gullible as to trust a girl she'd only known for a day?

"She's been cooking our breakfast all morning," said Cassius. "Speak up."

"I told him about your arrival," said Marcella, her eyes wide. "I told him."

Cassius sighed. "Obviously, but did you tell him anything about us? A description or an accusation?"

"No, only that your women were dressed in Eastern garb and that there were only four of you," said Marcella.

"Okay. So why did he attack Lucilia?"

"He thought we were the ones . . . the Bacchantes," Lucilia said, sitting down hard on her thin mattress.

“But why did he think that WE were the ones the Senate’s trying to round up?” asked Cassius.

“Probably the Eastern garb,” said Valeria, coming to stand beside Marcella, and patting the girl on the back. “We’ve been rather careless. It would have been a good disguise if we had just been passing through. The delay cost us and made us look more suspicious, though. And then there are all the cult’s associations. They do say it originated somewhere east of Greece. But I would never have thought they’d look into its customs in such detail.”

“Of course! The stories about the origin of the cult,” said Cassius, shaking his head at the corpse on the floor. “I should have remembered. This wouldn’t have happened.”

“I wouldn’t have thought the Senate would look so far into the matter either,” said Lucilia, suddenly feeling sympathetic toward Cassius despite her best efforts to maintain her ire. “And if they knew anything about the rites or membership at all, it would be a ridiculous thing to count on an Eastern appearance giving any Bacchantes away. Since they obviously don’t, though, I guess it’s as reliable a clue as any. Especially with the popularity of Euripides these days.”

“I hope Habilis is all right,” said Valeria, rubbing her neck with one hand.

“I’m sure he is,” said Lucilia, wondering how long her mother had held her concerns inside out of reluctance to distract from the goal at hand. “Sempronia probably has a similar team out to find him and help him escape.”

“You’re probably right,” said Valeria, but she didn’t look at Lucilia when she said it.

“We’d better get going,” said Cassius, stepping past the body of Marcella’s father and coming to stand between the two women. “Our quick pace yesterday brought us close to the wharves. I think we can make it to the ship Sempronia hired by mid-afternoon if we hurry—and if there aren’t any other delays. Gather what you need,” he said, looking around the room. After everyone had nodded their assent, he headed off in the direction of the small kitchen room.

“Are you coming?” Lucilia asked, turning to Marcella. “There isn’t much left for you here.” She glanced meaningfully at the corpse.

At first, the girl did not respond. Her chin was resting on her chest and her long, dark tresses were obscuring her face, so Lucilia couldn’t tell what her reaction was without her speaking.

“There was never much for me here before,” said Marcella, giving the body a long look. “If I do, though, what’s to prevent that man from killing me, too.” The spite in her voice was undeniable, and she punctuated her concern with a jabbing motion in the direction Cassius had gone.

“I don’t suppose there is anything. You’ll have to take it on faith,” said Valeria, brushing past the two and heading for the room they had slept in. “I, for one, am going to take this time to find the facilities and wash up. I feel like I haven’t bathed in years.”

Lucilia nodded, but made no move to follow her mother.

Once Valeria was out of hearing distance, Lucilia tried again to tell the girl to join their group. “You should come with us. He won’t hurt you unless you appear a threat. I don’t believe you are. I think you were just being a daughter trying to obey her uncle.”

“Maybe,” said Marcella, looking up at Lucilia. “I hope you’re right. But even so, that doesn’t make it any better.” She stared at the body of her dead uncle for a long time. Lucilia didn’t interrupt her again, wondering what on earth he had done to produce such coldness in his daughter towards his very corpse.

Lucilia shook her head, then turned and went out of the room in the direction her mother had gone. Nothing would solve the problem of how to know who to be faithful to. But a bath might clear her mind. Lucilia was tired of worrying about spies and betrayal; she just wanted to grieve in peace, if grieve she must. She, too, hoped Habilis was okay. Her father would be a welcome sight.

10

Day 3: Afternoon

“Fuck!” screamed Lucilia as she tripped headlong over a jagged edge of cobblestone. She caught her balance on the wall of the building beside her, barely preventing herself from falling to the ground. Looking down, she saw that her toe was bleeding and part of the toenail was hanging at an unnatural angle. Sandals might be good for warm weather, but they were not adequate for these ill-kept back roads.

Valeria looked over her shoulder at her, but seeing that she had only stubbed her toe, the party continued onward without halting.

They were following alleys that ran more or less parallel to the *Via Ostiensis*, but that were considerably less inhabited. After the disaster of the previous night, Cassius had started taking extra precautions against drawing attention to themselves. Instead of being dressed as harem girls going to be sold at a slave market, they were all now dressed as peasants, in dirty tunics and with their hair carefully concealed in plain, somewhat stained scarves. Cassius and his remaining comrade had donned additional tunics over top of their bronze cuirasses in an attempt to disguise themselves as well while remaining protected in the event of an attack. However, if she listened closely, Lucilia could still make out the rustle of their breastplates under their tunics. She was glad that Cassius had agreed to wear regular shoes instead of the military issue army boots that had metal studs affixed to the soles. Intimidating effect or not, she thought it was better to be as quiet as possible.

The weather was even sunnier and warmer than it had been the day before. There was a crisp breeze that Lucilia only occasionally caught a draft of when passing between buildings, but it was refreshing just the same. Everywhere, there were towering heaps of what looked like rubble, stone that had been deteriorating for years due to the climate and lack of upkeep, buildings constructed higher than was safe, lofty tenements that grew taller and more unsteady as they increased in elevation. She felt sorry for the people who inhabited them. When they'd seen the first of these precarious buildings, Marcella had told her that the people who lived in this sort of neighborhood were at the greatest risk of fire of any people in Rome, simply because of the difficulty inherent in including expedient routes of escape in buildings so tall. During the dry season, Marcella had said, opportunistic merchants would frequent these sorts of neighborhoods, waiting to spot a fire. Being wealthy, they would try to buy the tenement from its landlord, who would often sell because he was unable to put out the fire anyway, and thus any money for the condemned building would be better than none. However, these merchants often employed troops of slaves for the sole purpose of putting out fires. It was not uncommon for one of these properties that seemed lost to be saved by the efforts of a handful of enterprising slaves, and therefore turn them into a profitable purchase. Lucilia couldn't believe such swindling wasn't illegal—that it was even an acceptable mode of advancement.

Lucilia had been talking on and off to Marcella for most of the morning. She was glad that the girl had decided to come along. It was easier not to think constantly about Decia with someone else's problems to worry about. It turned out that Celer was

not, indeed, her father's name. And her father hadn't even owned the place where they'd stayed. Celer was some distant relative who had retired to a life in the countryside on turning fifty. He had bequeathed the property of his old inn to Marcella, since he was fond of her. However, as she had only been a small child at the time, and a female, the law had required that she have someone to oversee the property and business for her, a *tutor**. As it was commonly held that small children and women could be easily taken advantage of in business matters, nobody had thought anything of her father, Caelius, petitioning to be her legal *tutor*. However, according to Marcella, he had ruined the business in no time at all with his wanton habits and excessive drinking. Now there was hardly anything left. All the former patrons had stopped going to Celer's because of Caelius' temper when he was in his cups, which was pretty much all the time. Marcella had tried to keep him away from the business just after lunch or in the late evening when customers were likely to come by, but he hadn't listened to her. What did a girl know? The customers would want 'Celer' to be there, running his establishment.

"What a joke that was," Marcella said, a note of bitterness in her voice. "The only thing he ever ran was his mouth."

Lucilia laughed before she could stop herself. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that you sound so much like my friend." She fell silent then, turning her face away from Marcella. She pretended to study the buildings as they passed by them, hoping to avoid further conversation.

“But what I don’t understand,” said Marcella, “is why you’re wanted criminals. My uncle was a drunk, but he wouldn’t have attacked patrons without some sort of provocation. There’s a reward for your capture. That’s a bit odd. You don’t seem the violent sort—with the exception of your comrade there.” She nodded her head in the direction of Cassius.

If she only knew, would she still have decided to risk her safety by traveling with them? Even destitute as she would be if she were left to her own devices? Lucilia had tried to block out the images of the men they’d killed along the way—but she still saw their faces every time she closed her eyes. She was beginning to doubt that it was fair to have killed anyone just to escape persecution. What of the families of the men they’d killed? How would they fare?

Valeria laughed, looking back over her shoulder at Lucilia and the girl. “The definition of crime changes depending on the person you ask,” she said. “To one person, for example, being Jewish is a crime. But to another, it’s a holy blessing.”

Marcella frowned. “But that doesn’t explain anything. There’s a reward out for you; you must have done something.”

“Well then, why did you even come with us if you really thought that?” asked Valeria.

“I didn’t exactly have much of an option,” Marcella said. “Even if I knew where Celer was living, and I don’t, I don’t expect that at his age he wants to take on the responsibility of bringing up a young girl. He would have to come up with a dowry

and everything. No, I can't ask that of him. That's why he gave me his business, I think, and you see what happened with that!"

"Marcella, what do you believe in?" asked Lucilia.

"Well, the gods, of course," said Marcella, "Zeus, Demeter, Mars, the regular pantheon. The household gods, too, and the ancestors' spirits. The regular things all good Romans believe in. Why?"

"Let's say that of course you believe in those things because they exist and you were raised to revere them. What sort of foolish Roman would denounce the gods? But suppose that you also believed that there should be more assistance for the needy, more personal freedoms, more choice for the lower classes, and more decision-making-power for women. What would that make you?" asked Lucilia.

"I don't think I understand what you mean," said Marcella, furrowing her brow. "How is that different?"

"Exactly," said Valeria.

"It's not," Lucilia added, "not really, anyway. But the Senate thinks it is. The Senate thinks that it's criminal to disagree with the customs of our ancestors—to not want to bear children, for example, or to want to marry someone of a lower class. The Senate thinks that to help a young girl out of an unwanted pregnancy is sacrilegious and un-Roman, that to donate food and clothing to starving people, Roman or not, is uncivilized. A Roman should take care of himself, his *familia*, his *amices*, and his *clientes*—not be beholden to every vagabond he sees suffering on the streets."

“I see,” said Marcella. “I think. They don’t want dissenting opinions, in other words.”

“Exactly,” Lucilia said.

“And where do you and your mother fit into all of that?” Marcella stepped to one side to avoid another of the jagged stones, not breaking her stride to do so.

“We’re the dissenting opinion,” said Valeria.

“Oh,” said Marcella.

Marcella lapsed into silence, and Lucilia didn’t say anything else to her. She was thinking about Decia again, her friend, her lover. She had been so inquisitive, so ready to question the commonplace when it didn’t work out for the best, so ready to reject traditions that didn’t suit her purposes, and look where it had gotten her. Her beloved Decia was dead.

“Shouldn’t we be there by now?” she heard her mother ask Cassius.

“Yes, but the ambush forced us out of our way a bit. We’re close now,” he said. “We should reach the wharves within the hour.”

Lucilia’s heart skipped a beat. She was ready to be out of Rome, away from her memories of persecution and rejection, but she didn’t know if she could relinquish all the tangible remnants of her time with Decia. She reminded herself that she didn’t have a choice, and pushed the thoughts from her mind. And what of Habilis? Would they just leave him behind? Could they leave him behind? He was as important to her mother as Decia had been to herself. Valeria must be anxious about him.

“Mother,” Lucilia said, “What are we going to do about Habilis?”

Valeria shook her head. She looked tired. “I don’t know, dear.”

“Cassius, there must be something we can do,” said Lucilia, unwilling to let the subject drop.

“Baby, I don’t even know where he is,” Valeria said. “If I did, it would be a different story. We could go get him—send someone back for him—do something. But I don’t know where Lucilius took him.”

“There’s not much we can do,” said Cassius. “Legally, he belonged to Lucilius, not Valeria, so she wouldn’t be able to free him even if he is still alive. And if the story Lucilius told us about freeing him only to turn him in for punishment is true, then he’s just as hunted as we are and joining with him would draw more people in search of us. We can hope that Sempronia found him and conveyed the meeting place to him—maybe he’ll be waiting for us.”

Valeria turned away from them, putting a hand to her chest. “Cassius, that’s a far stretch and you know it. I doubt Lucilius really ever freed him. He was probably just saying that to give Lucilia false hope. He’s a cruel bastard.”

“And even if he did free him,” said Lucilia, “that’s all assuming that there aren’t already guards or hired spies waiting for us in place of the original contacts.” Lucilia tripped over another cobblestone but refused to let herself cry out this time.

“True,” said Cassius, “But I don’t know what else we can do. We’ve gone too far to circle back and look for him. And who knows where he is if he isn’t in Sempronia’s care. That’s also assuming that she hasn’t been infiltrated by spies by now, which we can’t be sure of either. No, we have to keep going. Our present

disguise is working much better. You can see that for yourselves. This isn't a sure process. Anything could ruin your escape. We have to keep going and hope that nothing else has gone awry. "

No one else said anything. The group of five traveled on in silence. The remaining foot soldier, if he had an opinion, didn't volunteer it. Lucilia could tell by the casual glances of the occasional passersby that they didn't look out-of-the-ordinary. No one looked twice at the group, and certainly, no one spoke to them.

"I could go in search of him . . . relay the meeting location," suggested Marcella finally.

Lucilia turned her head to face the girl directly and met her gaze, staring into her eyes and wondering if she could trust this person whom she'd only known for a few days.

"Absolutely not," said Cassius. "It's out of the question." He didn't even turn around to look at her.

From the smell of water in the air, the stench of frying fish, and the increasingly balmy breeze Lucilia could tell that they were within blocks of the Tiber. Any moment now, they would go around a corner and see the wharves, the ramshackle huts on the side of the river, the various fishing, sailing, and transport vessels afloat on the water or tied to docks all along the waterside. There would be vendors selling everything from cheap fish-kebabs to the expensive, sought-after garum*.

"I could go with her. You know, to ensure her safety," said Ennius, Cassius' last remaining soldier. He had been silent up to this point.

“What if you don’t make it back before we leave?” asked Cassius. It was the first sign of sentimentality Lucilia had witnessed from him. “We would have to leave without you. It’s become too risky to wait any longer. What if another group of hired gladiators is waiting for us?”

“You can’t know that,” said the soldier. “And anyway, I can take care of myself. Of us,” he corrected, so quickly that no one seemed to notice but Lucilia.

“Yes, I know you can. But what about us? I’m not sure that I’m enough to protect three women,” said Cassius.

“They can assist you in that,” Ennius said, coming up in the line to stand beside Lucilia and patting her firmly on the shoulder. “They’re not half-bad as fighters—though nothing compared to Decia.”

Lucilia squirmed out from under the soldier’s patting hand, disgusted that he would mention her name so nonchalantly.

“No,” said Cassius. “I made my decision already. We’re not talking about this anymore. Forget it.”

They walked on in silence until they came in sight of the river.

“Which one is it?” asked Lucilia, surveying the line of wharves that ran as far as the eye could see along the bank of the Tiber. Some were nicer than others, gleaming with fresh paint on the wooden walkways or shiny metal mooring rings looped around poles, waiting for ships to secure. Some were so fallen apart and grimy that she wasn’t even sure they were still operational.

Cassius turned to look at her, and she nodded to the various docks sprawling all along the riverside before them.

“We’re looking for one with an inn right next to it,” Cassius said. “I guess the inn is painted green; it’s called the ‘Seaweed’.” He lowered his voice noticeably. “It’s run by a man named Mucius. He’s missing his left eye.”

Lucilia gasped, but her mother laughed at her. Marcella and Ennius, who had fallen back to the rear of the group, said nothing.

“What?” asked Sempronia, smiling at her daughter.

Lucilia colored, ashamed of herself for reacting unfavorably to news of the proprietor’s disfigurement. She told herself that no respectable Bacchant would shun a person merely because of an accident, whether of fortune or of birth. Again, she found herself overly critical of people she knew she shouldn’t judge. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I just wasn’t expecting such a graphic detail.”

“How’d he lose it?” asked Valeria.

“Something about a fishing accident,” said Cassius. “The details were unclear. But feel free to ask him about it yourself when we meet up with him.” Cassius led them along a narrow street in view of the water, but not so near as to attract the notice of the vendors or beggars. From a distance, Lucilia figured the soldiers’ disguises were convincing, but up close, even she could tell that they were wearing something lumpy and heavy under their plain tunics; the breastplates themselves were barely concealed below the loose collars. Any attention was unwanted attention at this point in their voyage.

For some time, Lucilia had felt that something was not quite right. She couldn't tell exactly what was wrong with the situation, but it seemed that her footsteps were louder than they should have been, that they were all talking much too loudly, or perhaps it was that she felt like someone was watching her. But when she would pause and turn around to try to spot whoever might be pursuing them, she saw no one out of the ordinary, no one who was even watching them.

"Ah, comrades!" called a man from a few yards away. At first, Lucilia paid him no heed, but he waved his arms emphatically and rushed to intercept the group. "Wait up," he said. "You're going to miss my tavern if you don't follow me."

"Mucius?" said Cassius, noting the man's leather eye patch concealing what must have been a ghastly hole where his left eye had once been.

"The very same," said Mucius.

Lucilia was surprised at his appearance. If not for the missing eye, he would have been handsome. He was tall and muscular, presumably from working on his boat, but the muscles were lean and wispy like a runner's, rather than bulky like those of a retired gladiator. His hair was dark, longer than usual for a man, and very curly. With his deep tan, he almost looked like a Thracian mercenary, but he could have been Greek, too. Lucilia had never been very good at identifying nationalities. His mustache was a strange addition to his appearance; she didn't know any men who willingly sported facial hair.

"Thanks for waiting for us," said Cassius, clasping hands with the man and nodding.

“Not a problem, my friend,” said the man who called himself Mucius, shaking Cassius’ hand vigorously. “Follow me. The crew is ready and waiting. The boat is docked a mere couple of yards from the door of my establishment. We’ll get you a nice hot meal and then get you on your way.” Mucius beamed at the group.

Lucilia saw her mother raise an eyebrow in Cassius’ direction, but if he noticed, he didn’t respond. He led the group along behind Mucius toward a narrow road that bisected the already thin path on which they were traveling. Lucilia looked behind her, hoping to grab Marcella’s attention and say something to her about the strangeness of the sudden encounter, but on not seeing the girl, or the soldier she had been speaking to, Lucilia grabbed Cassius’ arm instead.

“What is it?” he asked. He half spun toward her while continuing to follow Mucius.

Lucilia motioned behind herself, to where the remaining two members of the group should have been walking. “Where do you suppose they went?” she asked, keeping her voice low so the other man wouldn’t hear her. “It’s dangerous for them to wander off, to both them and to us. What if they’re caught? What if they lead guards back to us? What if they run into more of Lucilius’ spies?”

“I think,” interrupted Valeria, “that we have to remember that Marcella isn’t really involved in this. After all, she isn’t even initiated, let alone a participant. No one could ever prove otherwise.”

“But she’s been conspiring with us to escape . . .” said Lucilia, leaving the logical conclusion unspoken.

“Is there a problem?” asked Mucius, coming to a halt in the middle of the road.

“We seem to have lost a couple of people,” said Cassius, falling into his customary military pose, hands on hips and feet spread wide.

“We can’t wait for them to catch up,” said Mucius. He didn’t smile when he spoke, but Lucilia wondered why he looked so satisfied.

Lucilia noticed that Valeria was looking at her. When Mucius turned back around, Valeria raised an eyebrow at her daughter. All Lucilia could do was shrug, though, shaking her head.

“Come on,” said Mucius, herding them along again, this time with outstretched arms. His hands were trembling slightly, but Lucilia couldn’t tell if this was because he was nervous or if it were a habitual trait.

There were more people on the streets now that the sun was high in the sky, warming the air. In fact, the way was crowded in places. It would have been impossible to walk freely had not so many people chosen to walk off to the side of the road on the pebbles and silt that comprised the Tiber’s banks. Mucius steered them off the main road after only a few minutes, leading them along a jagged trajectory toward the only green building within sight, the ‘Sea Kelp’. It was positioned in the small space between two granaries, each of which had a mass that individually would have dwarfed the small green inn, but together rendered the middle building inconspicuous. Lucilia could see why Sempronia favored this particular establishment.

“Mother, what are we going to do? What if they went off in search of Habilis?”

Lucilia whispered to her mother as they hurried along toward the ramshackle wooden building.

“Gods, I don’t know,” Valeria whispered back. “It’s too dangerous to try to rescue him; what if he’s already been tried by the Senate? He could be awaiting execution even as we speak. But if he is still alive, and I pray he is, I hope they don’t run into trouble searching for him. I hope they don’t ask the wrong person about a runaway slave’s whereabouts.”

Lucilia nodded. “That’s not what I meant, though,” she said. “What about Marcella? You don’t think she’d turn us in do you?”

“Her? No. She’s just a girl,” said Valeria. “What motivation would she have for betraying us?”

“She’s a girl with no money and no prospects,” said Lucilia. “She doesn’t have a lot of options now that her father’s been killed, rightly or otherwise. 100,000 *asses* would go a long way for someone in her position.”

“You think we have any more options than she did?” Valeria asked. “I believe she’s a kind young woman. I don’t think she’d turn us in out of greed.”

“I agree. But self-preservation is a strong motivator,” said Lucilia, hoping she was wrong about her concerns even as she voiced them.

They reached the green building and Mucius hurried them through a gate that didn’t appear to be connected to a fence. Nevertheless, he pulled up on a crossbar and

swung the brittle wooden planks on their hinges, admitting first Cassius and then the two women.

“Now, if you’ll just follow me right this way,” said Mucius, taking the lead and heading toward the small front door of the green building. This close, Lucilia could see that what she had at first thought was timber was actually a composite pile of deadwood green from the algae in the water and warped almost beyond recognition.

The group entered the building single file, as the width of the door would not permit two abreast. Lucilia was last to enter. The space was much larger on the inside than its exterior had suggested. In fact, there were a multitude of empty chairs and tables set up throughout the main room, with a staircase at the back of the room leading up to what were probably the rooms for overnight guests. Immediately to the left there was a long, wooden bar, and behind it, a swinging door with what was presumably the kitchen on its other side.

“I’m starved,” Lucilia said.

Cassius and Valeria responded in assenting tones. Mucius nodded and gestured for them to find seats. He told them he would see what was to be had in the kitchen and have it brought right out to them while he completed the arrangements for their departure. The trio nodded and headed for the nearest chairs.

“So what do you think of our charming host?” asked Cassius after Mucius had left the room.

Valeria just shook her head.

“I think we shouldn’t trust him,” said Lucilia.

Cassius laughed. "I agree. I can't quite say why, but I thought he would be more . . . wholesome-looking. First off, this guy doesn't look like he's old enough to have sustained any sort of serious injury, let alone a permanently disfiguring one. And he definitely doesn't look like any seasoned sailor I've ever met."

"Exactly," said Valeria. "Much too dainty. He's a spy."

"Maybe," said Cassius. "But if so, who hired him? Lucilius? Surely, he wouldn't waste his time or remaining money. The Senate? When there's already a reward out? It's not likely. And how would he know so much about us and our trip if he's not the real Mucius?"

They fell silent then. Lucilia wondered who the man who called himself Mucius was. Maybe he was the true Mucius, after all, and they were just paranoid from being ambushed so many times already. That was the most likely truth. She reminded herself again that it wasn't good to judge people before getting to know them.

"And anyway, there's no proof that he's anything other than what he says he is," said Lucilia quietly.

Mucius came back in through the swinging door to the kitchen then, carrying a large tray of bread and cheese. He had a tankard in his free hand. He set both items gingerly upon the table nearest their seats, telling them to enjoy some refreshments while he made sure all was in preparation. Then he left again. The group set to the food like ravenous dogs, having not eaten since very early that morning. Through the

cracks in the driftwood walls, Lucilia could make out the orange glow of afternoon sunlight. It was later than she had thought.

“What do you think is upstairs?” asked Valeria.

“Probably just bedrooms,” Cassius said, shrugging and dipping a bread crust in the jug of wine.

“I wonder,” Valeria said, rising and heading toward the landing. “Someone should check them out—make sure no more surprises are waiting for us.”

“Mother, don’t you think you should stay here, like Mucius said,” Lucilia asked.

“Don’t worry. I’m just going to peek upstairs and make sure there’s no one else here,” Valeria said, smiling at her daughter as she began to ascend the first stairs.

“It won’t take long.”

Lucilia looked to Cassius to intervene, but he just shrugged again and made no move to oppose Valeria’s wishes.

Valeria walked up the stairs very slowly, looking around with every step upward.

Below on the ground floor, Lucilia watched as her mother disappeared into the upper area of the building. For long minutes, there was no sound. Cassius seemed unperturbed, occasionally taking casual sips from the jug of wine, but more often munching on a bread crust or a wedge of cheese. Lucilia’s stomach hurt, but she made an effort to eat some of the bread anyway, hoping the food would settle her nerves.

When a loud crash erupted from overhead, Cassius sprang to his feet, upsetting the table in his shock. He ran to the stairs and began ascending hurriedly, Lucilia climbed out from behind the upended table, rushing to follow immediately behind him. In her haste, she didn't notice much about the stairs, but the walls of the hallway they came out on were conspicuous enough for their lack of doors. What sort of inn, even one used primarily as a cover, didn't have upstairs rooms? Lucilia ran along behind Cassius for only a few seconds before they reached the end of the hallway, and the only door they had seen on the second floor.

"After you," said Lucilia, panting for breath. Cassius, though, had already slammed his shoulder into the door, splintering the dry wood beneath the impact.

"Valeria!" Cassius called, coming to a halt in the doorway. Lucilia pushed him, but he didn't budge. She couldn't see what was going on in the room beyond his shoulders. The silence was ominous.

"Mother?" Lucilia asked.

Cassius elbowed her into silence and took another step into the room, allowing Lucilia room to peer from behind only one shoulder. The room was small, much smaller than even Celer's had been. In one corner was Lucilius, in the purple-bordered toga of a Senator, holding a scroll casually in one hand, his greasy hair falling limply across his narrow shoulders. Beside him, though, was a much larger man with a shaved head and fresh cuts across his bare shoulders. This second man was holding Lucilia's mother by the hair. Valeria didn't seem to be resisting him; her head was

hanging, chin on chest, and she looked like she might have been unconscious. In the other far corner was a body, slumped on the floor in an unmoving heap.

“Lucilius, what are you doing?” asked Cassius, shattering the silence but not the tension hanging in the air. “And what are you doing wearing *that*?”

Lucilius laughed. “Taking back what’s mine,” he said calmly, running his free hand over the purple border of the toga. The two men stared across the small room at each other.

“People can’t belong to other people, Lucilius,” said Cassius. Lucilia liked the way his voice seemed to growl like an angry lion as he spoke to her one-time-father.

“In Rome, a man can own whatever or whomever he can afford,” said Lucilius. “Now, turn over my other property and I may let you leave with your face intact.”

Cassius laughed, flinging off his outer tunic to reach his gladius still hanging at his hip. He drew the short sword and spread his feet on the floor, beckoning Lucilius’ hired thug.

“Always using force where you should have used tact,” said Lucilius, shaking his head. “If you were my son, I’d have taught you how to deal with your problems the right way.”

“You do such a good job of dealing with problems yourself,” said Cassius.

“I did until those infernal women started interfering with my plans!” protested Lucilius. “Everything would have worked out if they had just done what they were supposed to do. Lucilia would have married Ulpian and ensured me the support I needed to earn my way back into favor with the other senators. Valeria wouldn’t have

betrayed me.” Even from where she was standing, Lucilia could see the spittle flying from Lucilius’ mouth. He was bright red in the face. “I should have divorced her years ago, but she was a conniving witch, always lying to me, making me believe she was loyal and obedient. Then I find out she’s betrayed me, and with my own slave—barely better than a dog. She didn’t deserve to live.” Lucilius spat on the floor. “Look at me now, though. See my robes, my power, my authority. They won’t cross me again!” Lucilius started laughing.

Lucilia and Cassius stood in silence, staring at the figure of Lucilius as his laughter increased in intensity until he fell over, clutching his stomach.

“They’ll never betray me again,” Lucilius spluttered.

Lucilia tried to edge past Cassius, but it was impossible to do so in the narrow space. She would have to remain slightly outside of the room, looking on at whatever would happen. Lucilia saw the bald man look toward Lucilius and grimace. He released his fistful of Valeria’s hair. Valeria collapsed on the ground, another unmoving heap on the floor. The bald man stepped over her slight form and with his bare fists raised in front of his face, advanced on Cassius.

Lucilia felt a warm gust of air on her shoulder, but dismissed it as the strange environs of the building. Cassius took two jabs at the bald man, who ducked more gracefully than Lucilia would have thought possible, putting himself well out of the way of Cassius’ attacks, but then Lucilia felt the warm breeze abruptly cease. In the next instant, there was a hand clamped firmly around her throat and she was being dragged away from Cassius’ back. She kicked out behind her as Cassius jumped

forward and slashed at the bald man. Her foot connected with a soft yet unmoving mass of flesh, sinking almost an inch before someone grabbed it by the ankle and she lost her balance, falling face first to the floor. She fell, landing hard on the bare wooden floor. Looking up, she saw that Cassius had moved closer to the bald man and was making use of his greater agility to thrust and stab the man between dodging blows from his fists. Lucilia tried to twist around to see her attacker but was prevented from doing so by his grip on her ankle.

“Cassius!” she said as the air went rushing from her lungs under the great mass pressing her downward. She couldn’t tell what was going on in the room beyond; all she could see were Cassius’ feet and the fat feet of the bald man, pacing in concentric circles.

“Damnit! Let go of her,” Cassius yelled, lunging forward a final time.

Lucilia heard a loud hiss and then found herself staring at the shiny top of the bald man’s head, lying several feet from where his body fell. She heard several meaty thuds, then there was a stream of red flowing beside her head on the floor, and her ankle was suddenly free. She pushed herself up slowly, trying to catch her breath.

Mucius was standing in front of her, but someone had relieved him of his left leg.

“Thank goodness we got back in time!” said Ennius, standing in front of the man who claimed to be Mucius, bloody gladius raised level with the man’s throat.

Surprised to see him again, Lucilia could only gape and gasp as she tried to regain her breath. “Lucilius,” she sputtered, gesturing to the room.

“Ennius!” exclaimed Cassius. “Good job.” Cassius turned back to wave his sword in a menacing arc toward Lucilius’ throat. “Don’t move,” he said to the man still lying in the middle of the floor.

As Ennius took a step closer to the imposter Mucius, brandishing the bloody sword near his face, the man tried to jump out of the way. The false Mucius lost his balance and fell against the wall.

“Just kill me, then,” the fake Mucius said. “There’s no sense prolonging it. If I’m to die, make it swift.”

“Like you were going to do for Lucilia?” asked Ennius, his lip curling up at the corner. “I should hang you out for the birds to feast on. Maybe then you’d learn to show respect.”

The imposter coughed a few times and then spat blood on the floor. He pushed himself away from the support of the wall. “I wasn’t going to kill her,” he said. “I just wanted the reward money.”

“The reward money again,” said Ennius, biting off his words. “When are you greedy bastards going to learn? I suppose next you’ll say you did it for the Republic.”

“And what if I did?” said Mucius.

“Hah,” said Lucilia, having finally regained her breath. She steadied herself against her part of the wall, staring directly into Mucius’ eyes. “What of my mother?”

“What of her?” said Mucius. “Her husband said she was missing. I was happy to let him know I’d found her.”

Lucilia held out her hand to Ennius, who promptly handed her the hilt of his gladius. With one swift motion, Lucilia stepped forward and stabbed Mucius through the stomach. “That’s for Valeria,” she said. “You filthy scum.” She wiped the point on his tunic, and then handed the sword back to Ennius.

“Merciless bitch,” gasped the dying Mucius. “Lucilius was right about you—you’re ungrateful.”

“What about him?” Lucilia asked, ignoring Mucius and gesturing back toward the room where Lucilius was still standing. “And where’s Marcella?”

“Cassius has him under close supervision,” Ennius said. “She’s downstairs, with the real Mucius.”

“You won’t get away with this. The Senate will catch up to you. And then you’ll have to pay for what you’ve done.” Lucilia heard Mucius fall to the ground. “You’ll pay for the blood you’ve spilt defending your criminal ways!”

Lucilia walked past the body and into the room where she’d seen her mother fall, followed closely by Ennius. Cassius was kneeling on the floor next to Valeria while Lucilius was staring seemingly at nothing. Ennius went straightaway to stand by Lucilius, pointing his sword at the man’s throat. Cassius nodded once at him.

“Is she okay?” asked Lucilia.

“She’s breathing,” said Cassius. “But she’s unconscious. Don’t worry. I see this sort of injury all the time. She’s probably just been knocked out. She’ll recover.”

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” Ennius asked, menacing Lucilius with the blade. “Any defense for your treasonous behavior before I execute you?”

Lucilius sneered, winking at Lucilia as if to suggest he didn't really believe Ennius' threat. "Execute a Senator? I don't think you'd dare, even such a criminal as you are!"

"My father was a Senator," Ennius said. "You disgrace the robes."

"He's not even a real Senator—" interjected Lucilia.

"Hah. No senator is father to a slave scum like you," said Lucilius, interrupting her. "You'd better watch what you say before you wind up in Lucilia's position. Look at her. She had it all. And now what? Nothing. She's the spawn of a slave, with no rights, with no money, with no prospects. What's left for her? Isn't that right, darling?" asked Lucilius, twisting his neck to look up at Lucilia. "Soon enough, you'll wish you'd never betrayed me."

"That seems very unlikely," said Lucilia. "But at least I'll be alive to wish anything."

"Will you?" asked Lucilius, glaring at her with all the hatred of a lifetime of frustrated ambitions blazing in his dark eyes.

Ennius shook his head, stepping back to avoid the impending spray of blood, and sliced Lucilius' throat. Lucilius' body slumped down and fell to one side. Lucilia marveled at how peaceful he looked, now that there was no animosity driving his every movement; if one didn't notice the blood seeping from the gash in his neck, one might have thought him merely sleeping on first glance.

"Is she okay?" Lucilia asked Cassius, stepping to the side of Lucilius' corpse and seeing her mother still lying prostrate on the floor. "Please tell me she's okay."

Lucilia's voice quavered a little as she spoke, but whether from exhaustion or trepidation even she couldn't tell.

"Perhaps," said Cassius. "It's more serious than I'd thought. She needs a medic."

Lucilia went to the other body on the floor, crouching down next to it and pushing aside some of the cloth from around the head. She gasped.

"What is it?" asked Cassius, remaining next to Valeria, cradling her head in his arms.

"Habilis," said Lucilia. She bent her head to the motionless man's mouth, trying to hear a breath or a moan. "Father," she said again, this time to the body on the floor.

"Here," said Cassius, extending his arm to her across the floor.

She took the proffered flask and, unstopping it, tilted it to Habilis' mouth, letting a few small drops of red liquid trickle out into the corner of his mouth. "Come on, Father" she said.

Cassius was ripping pieces from his shed tunic. Once he had a good number of pieces, he used them to bandage Valeria's head and to make a sling for her left arm. "I think this should do," he muttered, carefully setting Valeria's body straight on the floor. "How is he?" Cassius asked, coming to crouch next to Lucilia.

Habilis coughed and sat up. "What happened?" he asked, looking around the room.

“We found you and V—” Lucilia began, but Habilis had already noticed Lucilius’ body by Ennius’ feet and was headed for it.

“Look away, Lucilia,” Habilis said, his voice deep and commanding. He stared at the body of his former master. He glanced once to see that she had obeyed, and thinking that she had, he spat on Lucilius’ face.

Lucilia vowed never to tell Habilis that she had seen him desecrate Lucilius’ corpse, an act considered shameful by even the most foreign inhabitants of Rome. After all the insults Lucilius always heaped on everyone around him, if anyone deserved to have his corpse dishonored, it was Lucilius.

“What now?” Lucilia asked.

“Where’s your mother?” Habilis turned, glancing around the room. Seeing Valeria lying on the floor, he went to her and crouched beside her, taking her right hand in his own.

“Hallo,” called a man’s voice from the hallway.

“Who goes there?” demanded Cassius, immediately rushing toward the doorway.

“It’s me, Mucius,” the man said.

Lucilia groaned, watching as Cassius disappeared into the hallway. A few moments later, he returned with a short, burly, one-eyed man in tow. Unlike the fake Mucius, there was nothing handsome about this man. His face was craggy with wrinkles and worry lines, his limbs were boxy and not the solid muscles she had

expected, and his hair was stringy and blonde—where he had any. He also had a full, very ill-kempt beard that looked like it might house its own family of insects.

“Hello,” said Mucius again, extending a hand to Lucilia. “It’s a pleasure.”

Lucilia looked to Cassius, but he just shrugged, smiling at her.

“Hello,” Lucilia said, taking the man’s hand in her own. “I hope you’re the real Mucius this time.”

The man chortled, but neither Lucilia nor Cassius laughed. Habilis didn’t take his attention off of Valeria. “I’m Mucius,” the new man said. “I see a lot has happened in my absence. I’m sorry I’m late. I got held up procuring papers for departure. Usually, it only takes an hour or so to get a permit to travel through the seas, but for some reason I was there all day.” He glanced around at the bedraggled group, noting the corpses on the floor. “I guess I see why,” he said. “They must have been onto me, but I was very careful.” The group nodded at him in unison; he probably had been. “But we don’t have much time. If you want to be away from Rome today, we have to leave now, before the good tide is lost.”

Cassius reached for Lucilia’s hand. “Come on,” he said. “We’ve made it this far; we shouldn’t stop here. Let’s go through with it as planned.”

Lucilia looked to Habilis, who was weeping now.

“I’ll be along,” Habilis said. “We’ll be along.” He squeezed the hand of the motionless woman.

“Lead on,” said Lucilia, heading toward the door. She only cast one look back to her mother before she was too far down the hallway to see her.

Behind her, she heard Habilis praying quickly and forcefully to Bacchus. Save Valeria, he would say in one breath, promising eternal devotion in the next, and the best vines of his harvest in the next, if only Bacchus would see fit to heal his beloved and let them escape together.

Mucius led Lucilia, Ennius, and Cassius downstairs, where there were eight bulging knapsacks lined up along the bar. And Marcella.

Lucilia nodded to the girl, glad she had decided to come after all.

“Those are your provisions,” said Mucius. “I thought there would be more of you, but you might as well take the extras anyway. You never know when you’ll need food.”

Cassius nodded to the man, hoisting two of the over laden packs onto his own back. Lucilia did likewise with two more.

“Should we wait for them?” she asked, looking over her shoulder.

“Coming,” called Habilis from the upper floor of the inn.

“Looks like we won’t have to,” said Cassius.

“It’s a good thing, too,” said Mucius, “because there isn’t time. You’re going to lose the last good tide if you don’t hurry.”

“You keep saying ‘you’,” said Cassius. “Aren’t you coming with us?”

“No,” said Mucius.

Marcella and Ennius started to protest, but he hushed them. “Someone has to remain here to help Paculla. It’s my duty,” he said.

Cassius nodded, patting the man firmly on the back.

Lucilia watched the stairs expectantly, but when Habilis came down alone, she looked away, unable to meet his eyes. “Mother,” she said.

Habilis took her hand and squeezed it.

The five of them followed Mucius as he walked behind the bar, through a small kitchen, and out a back door that led to the wharves along an overgrown path. It was almost sunset. The setting sun on the waters of the Tiber looked for all the world like blood. Lucilia clenched her teeth and walked on toward a pier. She could just make out a small sailing vessel at the other end.

Epilogue

One year later, a small town in Hispania

It was already time for the spring celebration again. Lucilia marveled at how much had transpired in only a year. There had been no sect of Bacchantes in Hispania when they had arrived. In a year's time, Lucilia was amazed at the progress she'd made toward the perpetuation of the cult; she already had a sizable following and now this huge cavern, finely carved out and just ready for guests, meetings, parties, worship, and anything else that she decided would benefit the people of the small community. The location was ideal—in the middle of a rural region with three small settlements within a day's journey. And the surprising absence of Roman presence in the province only enhanced the prospects for building a following; she had been relieved to realize that there were no centurions or soldiers stationed anywhere nearby. She had even found a merchant who volunteered to supply the wine from his own vintage.

She gathered a basket full of tall candles from the chest hidden away behind the benches near the front of the sanctuary, making sure all of the wicks had been trimmed. She lugged the heavy basket down the red carpet leading down the aisle between the rows of benches until she had reached the very back of the cavern. There, a polished stone altar stood out prominently from the moss-covered wall. She set the candles up one at a time on the smooth surface along the edge of the altar, making sure they were steady and wouldn't topple over in the middle of the ceremony. Finally, she placed the last candle at the foot of a statue in the alcove behind the altar. The statue

was an image of Decia, hands raised in praise of Bacchus, hair flowing down her shoulders in buoyant tresses, her mouth curved upward in a confident smirk—the way Decia had always smiled. Lucilia heaved a heavy sigh, wishing for the billionth time that things had turned out differently for Decia. Then she kissed the cheek of the statue and headed back down the aisle to replace the basket.

“About ready?” Cassius called, peering in through the entrance of the cavern.

“Yes,” she said. “I wish you’d shave; you look like a drunkard.”

He laughed at the criticism, but she hadn’t been joking. In Rome, he never would have let his personal hygiene go like this. He claimed it helped him to fit in better, but she had serious doubts about that. Many of the natives were clean-shaven and never had any problems fitting in. Ennius, for that matter, was clean-shaven and seemed to get on just fine with their few neighbors. “Just about,” she added. “You can tell them to come on in.”

Cassius stepped inside, looking around appraisingly at the walls of the cavern, hung with elaborate paintings of fauns and centaurs, nymphs and sirens, gods and mortals, all dancing and drinking and enjoying themselves.

“She would have liked this, you know,” Cassius said, coming to stand next to Lucilia by the chest of sacred materials. “You were right. That statue is the perfect touch. Say what you will about Greeks, that sculptor we met back in Ostia did a remarkable job. We were lucky to come across him when we did!”

“I know,” said Lucilia, smiling sadly. “Praxiteles was a godsend. We were lucky, too, that I had the presence of mind to bring my sketchbook with me that night

we left Lucilius' house. Praxiteles told me that it was helpful to have a sketch to work from. He said he couldn't have gotten the expression—the eyes—right without it.”

Cassius smiled and squeezed Lucilia's shoulder. “It's a wonderful thing you're doing.”

She nodded at him, but didn't meet his eyes.

He left then, returning a few moments later at the head of a procession. Habilis smiled warmly at her as he entered the room, embracing her and kissing her on the cheek. Ennius and Marcella were close behind him. From the girth of Marcella's swollen belly, Lucilia expected that Marcella's child would be born very soon; she was surprised they had risked coming out with her so near the anticipated delivery date.

As the worshippers entered the cavern and took their seats at the many wooden benches filling the open space, Lucilia smiled. This, the rites and her dear friends, were what mattered now. Decia would have wanted this. At least now, these people, so many of whom were slaves or peasants, would have some succor from the indifferent world of conquest and subjugation. Lucilia took her place at the head of the gathering, smoothing the silk of her ceremonial robe and adjusting the thyrsus in her hand. She looked out at the expectant faces.

“Friends,” she began. “We've come together today to celebrate the mysteries of the great god, Bacchus”

FINIS

CONTEXTUAL NOTES

- 5 *customs of the ancestors: mos maiorum* in Latin; the traditions handed down to the Romans by their forefathers; the tenets upon which Roman society functioned.
- domus*: Latin for house.
- urbs*: Latin for city (Rome)
- 6 *exedra*: Latin for a sitting room, which is precisely the function of these rooms in a Roman house.
- 10 *religio*: Latin for religion, but also carries the significance of religious duty, piety, and morality.
- 11 *Quaestor*: a financial administrator; the lowest step on the *cursus honorem*, the path by which a patrician of senatorial rank ascended the political hierarchy in Rome; a man was only eligible for this position after he served his required military duty, or if he had a lot of support in the Senate and strong family connections.
- 13 *the Rape of Lucretia*: The mythological tale of a Roman woman in the time of the kings who was raped by an enemy for her father and husband as a means of offending them; she killed herself to goad her two male relatives into seeking vengeance for the crime that would otherwise have been settled through monetary means.
- 15 *stola*: the drape Roman women often wore over their long gowns; similar to shawls today.
- 18 *cubiculum*: a small room near the front of the house that functioned as a bedroom.
- tablinum*: the large, main audience chamber just inside the atrium of the house; where guests and clients were received and the day's business took place.
- labor*: Romans typically used this term to refer to work, both manual and mental.
- pietas*: religious devotion, worship, duty; like *religio*, this term carries many significations and involves obligation and politics.

- 19 *Perseus' trials*: in Greek mythology, Perseus was an important hero, similar to Hercules.
- 49 Athanassakis, Apostolos. "7: To Dionysos." *The Homeric Hymns*. 2nd ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004. 50-51. Print.
- 51 *thyrsus*: the fennel stalk with ivy on the end that was a common attribute of Bacchus/Dionysus in the Classical world.
- 52 *poisoned*: In 331 BCE, a year of plague, 20 patrician wives were charged with poisoning their husbands and subjected to a trial by ordeal (they were locked in a room for 30 days or so and given a few rations; if the gods provided for them beyond that, they were exculpated for whatever crime they had been charged with—if not, they were dead). 170 more matrons were executed as a result of the investigation.
- 77 *Pentheus*: for this particular story about Bacchus, see Euripides' play, *Bacchae*.
- 87 *denarii*: denomination of Roman coinage; roughly equivalent to 1 USD today; struck of solid silver at their original introduction into Roman currency.
- 88 *manus*: Latin for hand; the term being under the hand of a father or husband was the Roman idiom for the closest male relative's financial, political, and physical power over his female relative.
- 106 *triumviri capitales*: Minor magistrates charged with the maintenance of order; during the Bacchic scandal, they were also in charge of ensuring that there were no night meetings, and of making provisions against fires; they were also entitled to distribute monetary rewards for information leading to the apprehension of a suspected criminal or to further names of possible criminals.
- 115 *sestertii*: silver Roman coin worth approximately .25 cents US currency; about 1/4th of a *denarius*.
- 116 *half the dowry*: typically, the Roman father, or oldest surviving male relative, was obligated to supply a woman's entire dowry upon marriage.
- 127 *Saturnalia*: Roman holiday honoring Saturn; occurred in mid-December (around the 17th); the celebration lasted several days and often included gladiatorial games, competitions, banquets, and other forms of entertainment.

- 130 *imperium*: a Roman military term describing the power of a commander over his legion or group of soldiers; also a power of the consul; essentially, having *imperium* meant having the power to move an army.
- 135 *Curia*: the Senate house in Rome; where all official business took place.
- 137 *torc*: a twisted metal ring worn around the neck; sometimes given to soldiers for valor during battle during the time of the Roman Republic.
- 151 *gladiators*: although primarily part of the entertainment industry of Rome, retired gladiators often worked privately as body guards or hired thugs for the right monetary compensation; they'd have been good fighters because in order to retire from gladiatorial duty, a gladiator would have had to have, at least in principle, won all of his fights.
- 165 *Porta Ostiensis*: the gate leading to the wharves along the Tibur.
Via Ostiensis: one of the roads that lead to the gate leading to the wharves.
- 168 *eunuchs*: Latin *cinaedes*; being a eunuch was unacceptable in Roman society because of the difficulty it presented in gendering these people, as well as the complications it created in their social identities; often, eunuchs in the Roman world were either male sex slaves or Egyptian priests (Galli).
- 193 *tutor*: the legal guardian of a child, girl, or woman; usually the father or oldest brother of a female; sometimes, a tutor could be a family friend if there were no surviving family with means of supporting the girl.
- 198 *garum*: a fish paste used as a condiment, made from oils secreted by spoiling fish in the sun; considered a delicacy in the ancient world.

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