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FORGED IN
ROME

ONCE THE
CITY'S SLAVE.

CAN HE BE
ITS MASTER?



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Forged in Rome

Conn Iggulden is one of the most successful authors of historical fiction writing today, with bestselling series on Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan and the Wars of the Roses, as well as two stand-alone novels: *Dunstan*, set in the red-blooded world of tenth-century England and *The Falcon of Sparta*, in which Iggulden returns to the Ancient World. Both instalments of his Athenian series, *The Gates of Athens* and *Protector*, and his recent Golden Age series, *Lion* and *Empire*, are *Sunday Times* bestsellers. *Tyrant* and *Inferno* follow on from the *Sunday Times* bestselling *Nero*, Iggulden's recent series about the Roman emperor. The Ink and Iron duology, which begins with *Forged in Rome*, follows the adventures of a slave captured from Britain and sent to Rome during the rule of Nero.



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INK AND IRON: BOOK I



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To Toni D'Urso – eighty years young

Foreword

By AD 37, the Roman Republic has become a true empire, stretching from Egypt to the sea coast of Gaul. After Julius Caesar's death in 44 BC, his great-nephew Octavian ruled first as part of a triumvirate, then as Emperor Augustus for over forty years. That long reign was both expansive and prosperous. Augustus consolidated Roman rule, establishing the empire as a stable power. As he said on his deathbed, he found Rome in clay, and left her in marble.

Augustus' adopted son would become emperor after him, in AD 14. At fifty-six, Tiberius came late to power – and was already jaded and utterly corrupt in his pleasures. He spent a great deal of his twenty-three-year reign on the island of Capri, leaving Rome in the hands of a friend. Rome deserved better.

AD 37 is witness to two events that change the path of history. Emperor Tiberius is finally killed – smothered in his bed. We cannot be sure his successor gave the order or was present, but it fits. That tormented young man is still best known by his childhood nickname: Caligula.

The second event will eventually affect the lives of everyone in Rome. In AD 37, another child is born. His

mother is Agrippina, great-granddaughter of Augustus. Sister to Caligula, she was a ruthless, intelligent woman, famed for her beauty. She named her son Lucius Ahenobarbus. We know him better as Emperor Nero.

This is not his story. I have told that in the trilogy *Nero*, *Tyrant* and *Inferno*. This is a very different character, one captured as a slave of Rome and sold to a noble house. Cormac has neither power, wealth nor status. However, in Rome of the first century AD, with skill and ambition – and luck – perhaps such things can be won.

Conn Iggulden

PART ONE

ROME

AD 37

I

Cormac could feel his heart beating. He pressed a hand against his ribs on the left and felt a pulse. It seemed fast, as if he had run a mile. He wondered what it would feel like if it suddenly stopped. He'd heard of one boy who had died in the middle of the exam the year before. It might not have been true, he didn't know. There were always stories.

The schoolroom smelled of some combination of the magister's armpits and sour breath, mingled with old wax, pine and dust. Cormac looked over the little collection of items he had laid out on the desk before him, touching them one by one for reassurance. He had sat at that very seat for years, seven mornings at a time until the *nundinae*, when he was expected to continue studies on his own. He tapped the inkstone with its bowl, one he had ground himself. He had mixed black dust to a paste with drops of water from a tiny phial, filled in the river Tiber on a previous visit. Any water would do, of course, but this was the *Gradus Scriptorum*. It was good luck to have the Roman river in the letters, everyone knew that.

The city bustled outside, a clamour of carts, steps and cheerful talk as people headed home for lunch. Cormac tried to shut it all out. The desks had been placed in neat rows, the afternoon sun shining gold in the dust. He could feel eyes on him and a slow flush prickled his neck. That gaze came with a silent pressure. If he did not look up, he would pay for it later.

Marcus Junius Silanus was known as 'Plato' in the estate house. The original name of the greatest philosopher ever to have lived meant 'broad-shouldered'. That part was true enough. Though Marcus was just sixteen, he had been trained with sword and shield from a young age. It showed in the width of him, only slightly spoiled by eyes that were a touch close together. In the right light, they seemed almost to meet, leaving odd expanses of face with no feature at all. It made him look stupid – and that was a fair assessment, at least in Cormac's view. Not that he would ever say so. For a boy without any great imagination, Marcus had a sort of genius when it came to causing pain. Cormac remembered the metal box only too well. It had been designed to carry live birds to market, so had holes punched in the top. The previous summer, Marcus had lit a candle inside and made the younger estate boys sit on it. The shameful part was how they had competed with one another. Cormac had held on as long as he could, though he could smell burning hair. Marcus had congratulated him on his endurance, he remembered. Somehow, the memory of that hurt more than the blisters.

The magister turned away from glaring at the row of boys and two girls. Cormac tried not to stare at those rare birds, though they intrigued him. Women were not allowed to draft wills, of course, nor do half the tasks of

a scribe in the city, not when a poorly written word might mean an entire estate going to a different branch. They had all heard the stories – such as the man who referred to his wife as ‘mother’ all through their marriage. On his death, he had left all he owned to that wife, only to see his actual mother dispute the will and win. Terms of affection caused all sorts of trouble for the scribes, even the elite caste employed by the imperial treasury. That was Cormac’s dream, to sit in splendour there one day, with great houses like the Junii and Furiï coming to him for his skill.

He felt a thrill pass through him. He was *ready*, his mind swimming in verse and the Twelve Tables of Roman law. When this day ended, he would have a piece of white parchment, of polished sheepskin in his hand. It would be his ticket to a different life. He flexed ink-dark fingers and smiled.

Stretching a leg across the narrow aisle, Marcus kicked his chair so hard it moved. Cormac saw the phial of water fall and grabbed for it. If he ran out of water or ink, there would be no help. A good scribe tended his own tools.

He missed. The bottle skipped and bounced on pine planking, but did not break. It came to rest closer to Marcus and of course the other boy put one large foot over it. His sandals were studded with iron and the threat was clear. One quick press and the glass would shatter. Cormac would take the blame and no doubt the whipping to follow. The Silanus house had only lent its tools that day, investing in him. They would demand an accounting.

He looked over at Marcus Junius Silanus. ‘Plato’ raised both eyebrows in silent question and Cormac was forced to give a sharp nod. The sandal was removed and Cormac snatched up the fragile thing. He would leave his exam

papyrus on his right side, though it cramped him to write on the left. All the hard work he had put in would be stolen like coins from a purse.

In that moment, he hated Marcus with a sort of heat that flashed behind his eyes. It filled him, making him strong. He was no thin-fingered scribe, not then. He had grown taller over the previous year, he was sure of it. Though he had not increased in strength, he could roll his own shoulders and imagine knocking 'Plato' down, he with his little pig eyes.

It was a fantasy. He and Marcus came into the city in a fine chariot each morning. Two drivers whipped powerful horses and expected right of way on the approach. Guards either sat above or loped alongside as protectors of a Silanus son. Marcus was the adopted heir to one of the great branches. The boy's uncle had no sons to inherit the estate of Cedri Magnae. The deal had been done a couple of years earlier, with the lad brought down from the north to learn about his inheritance. Marcus was already promised to some wealthy daughter of another family. It was how the senate kept their power, as far as Cormac could see. They took it from the earth in crops and ingots, or they married more. Not all the crops were green, either. Some of them were taken from villages by white cliffs, bound and sold at auction, their own farms lost to view.

Cormac made himself breathe, touching each of the items on his desk once more, moving the water bottle from the edge. He tested the point of the reed with his thumb, nodding and breathing through his nose. He was just a few pages away from leaving the school for ever. When he had his gradus, he would never set foot in that room again. It was a joyous prospect, one to start him dreaming.

He found himself smiling. When he glanced over, Marcus was scowling, looking almost afraid.

Cormac forced himself to concentrate. Being stupid was its own punishment, he supposed. Marcus Silanus was free, rich and Roman. He was destined for the army or the senate, or both. Yet he would never understand the things that mattered. In the small hours sometimes, as Cormac stole a few extra moments in bed, he felt he could see the whole empire, from the western coast of Gaul to Judaea. There was a temple in Rome with a map on one of the walls, made from thousands of tiny pieces of coloured stone. Cormac could name all the regions and even the major families marked in gold: the Furii, the Fabii, Aemilii . . . the Junii, from whom the Silanus family claimed descent. If he focused enough, if he made the world still, he thought he could feel the city that ruled, half a million people rising and eating and working together. It was a vision he could not share with anyone else. When he had tried, the other boys just looked at him or tapped their heads.

‘The gradus scriptorum for this year, 790 ab urbe condita is as follows . . .’

Cormac had to stop himself thinking about the founding of Rome, almost eight hundred years before. He preferred to take his dates from each emperor, as was becoming more popular. That would make the year twenty-three of the reign of Tiberius . . . He bit his knuckle as the magister droned on. It was good news.

‘. . . for penmanship, Horace will be our guide. You will produce the first eighty lines of his Odes, without error. I will collect those and issue new papyrus for an analysis of his relationship with his father – as discussed in Satire VI,

book the first, lines sixty-five to one hundred and nine . . . For arithmetic, you will discuss Euclid and his rules for the formation of triangles.'

Cormac tensed. If that was it, he wanted to get started. There was a shadow stick on the wall with hours carved into the wood. All the pupils had studied it on summer afternoons, when the line seemed to slow or cease to move at all.

'Finally . . .' the magister continued.

Cormac swallowed and Marcus shifted in the chair next to him. They both saw something bad coming in the man's pleasure.

'... for your exploration, you will discuss the three paths of Parmenides, with particular concern for the example of mortal opinion.'

The magister allowed himself a thin smile as the class groaned. Fourteen boys and two daughters of a noble house sat there blinking. Cormac glanced at his companion and saw Marcus Silanus looking utterly blank. He wracked his own memory, trying to recall a text he'd found so convoluted he'd thought the author might have written it for spite.

The magister sighed to himself, his arrow flown. Almost in irritation, he waved a hand to begin and in moments the scratch of reeds filled the little room. Cormac took a long breath. Horace was a favourite of the magister and he had prepared a number of his texts. He was much less confident about Parmenides. Should he write down all he could remember of the Greek's arguments while he was fresh? He could do that and finish the penmanship at the end. He knew those lines well enough, he was sure. Though his hand would be a claw by then.

He felt Marcus glaring, waiting for him to produce

something that could be copied. Had the big ox learned nothing at all? Cormac hated him, for his sullen gaze, for his strength, for his cruel laughter. Still, this was the gradus scriptorum. This was the door that would give Cormac value in the world. For one like Marcus, it meant being able to understand the speeches of his peers. For Cormac, it was his entire life. He would not fail, no matter what obstacles they put in his way.

He touched the point of his reed to the ink, letting black threads creep up. This was his day. He put all his worries aside and wrote the first line of an ode. Horace had been a genius, there was no doubt about that. He was also the son of a slave – a man who had made himself of value to his masters and *bought himself free*. That freedman had believed in education and sent his clever son to the best tutors in Rome. Cormac wondered if the magister had chosen the text with that in mind, or simply for the complexity of thought. He glanced up, but the magister appeared to be asleep, leaning back in his chair with eyes shut. Cormac smiled, feeling confidence swell as he wrote with a sure hand. He could see lines before him, unrolling like a scroll in the air.

A clatter of boots on wood was one more thing to ignore at first. Cormac felt his lips thin as someone opened the door to the schoolroom and the magister jerked awake from his drowse. There was some indignant whispering and Cormac could not resist glancing up, though he feared losing the thread of his thoughts. He had finished the Horace; it was the serpent coils of Parmenides that strangled him then. Yet his reed dried in the air as he saw the magister pushed firmly aside and a pair of armed men

enter. They had not bared their blades and there was still no alarm. Cormac knew them for Silanus guards. Urban was a free man, recruited to serve the Silanus estate after retiring from work in the Circus. He was fiercely loyal to the family – and to Marcus in particular. The other was less imposing, one of a dozen new recruits over the previous year. Cormac knew Albanus from the carriage that brought them to the city each morning. Of course, he knew each face from the Cedri Magnae estate, exactly as he might have learned every son, daughter or cousin in a village. Besides that, both Urban and Albanus wore the ornate armour the Silanus family favoured, marking them as private guards rather than legionary soldiers. They sported wristbands of leather that had been dyed and painted creamy white, with the same colour appearing on shield rims and in bands of ivory on sword hilts. The Junii Silanus clan owned the Whites, the chariot team that raced in the Circus. As far as Cormac could tell, they owned the colour itself.

The two men crossed the room with eyes on Marcus. As the rest of the class stared, Urban dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

‘Speak,’ Marcus said, though his voice shook. He watched as the ex-gladiator rose, standing with him so that they faced one another, his scripts forgotten.

‘*Dominus*, a message has come from the estate. I . . . I have orders for you to return immediately.’

Marcus paled as Cormac blinked. The term ‘dominus’ was one for a man in authority, never a boy. It meant the impossible. It meant the elder Silanus they had left that morning was dead – and Marcus Junius Silanus was at that moment master of a noble house.

Marcus glanced down at tight black lines of writing, his mouth opening and closing. Cormac still sat and he could feel time slipping away like water. He too rose and the guard glanced over, giving him a nod.

‘Can we not . . . finish here?’ Cormac asked desperately. He knew better than to challenge an order, but he had given too much to this just to see it forgotten in a crisis. What did another hour matter? His eyes pleaded with Marcus, though the great sheep seemed lost, stunned by his new responsibilities.

‘It is not far from the end . . .’ Cormac pressed on, ‘and we have worked hard for the gradus scriptorum. It will be another half-year before it is held again and . . .’

Urban held up a palm, frowning. He was around forty and still trained every day. There was no weight on him and the muscles of his legs were astonishingly distinct. In some ways, Urban had the wiry frame of a boy, though he had won sixty bouts in the arenas, so Cormac had heard. Either way, the man looked disgustingly fit, still capable of enforcing his authority. The threat in just that open hand made words dry in Cormac’s mouth. Though his heart broke, he waited for the axe to fall.

Marcus Silanus gathered himself. He shook his head as if to clear it of confusion, jaw muscles clenching visibly as he digested the news. He looked at Cormac, then at the papyrus sheets piled at his right hand.

‘Come,’ Marcus said nobly, gesturing to the door. ‘Duty takes us away.’

Cormac moved in a sort of daze, gathering up inkstone and water bottle, settling his finished sheets in a neat pile. His sight blurred as he was taken from a world he knew, without the prize he had worked to win. It was unfair,

monstrously so, but he dared not say a word. He was a slave – and his worth had just been reduced to match the lowest ranks. Without the *gradus scriptorum*, without that mark of scholarship, he could not set out his stall on festival days to produce wills and contracts for the people of Rome. He could not save coins he might earn with that work until he bought himself free. He could not apply to the treasury as a freedman, rising in status to serve praetors or senators. He could not take a wife, nor have sons to follow him. His entire life was in ruins.

He stumbled as he followed Marcus and the house guards out of the schoolroom, blind with tears. Urban saw, but chose to ignore it. The magister too said nothing. He just stood with head bowed, a man of low estate and no wealth, preferring to be unnoticed by a Silanus.

Outside, the carriage was the one sent to the city that morning. Two drivers sat on the high bench, sharing a long whip and ready to send the team trotting east down the long road to the estate. Urban opened the door for Marcus and Cormac climbed in alongside him, still mute at the change in their fortunes.

As Urban began to close the door, Marcus Silanus put out his hand and stopped its swing.

‘Is my uncle truly dead?’ he said.

Urban winced, looking up and down a busy street. This was news to fly across the city. There would be members of the senate who might profit from it, snatching up businesses or selling their own concerns before the price collapsed. Rome was a trading city and so Urban leaned very close and kept his voice to a whisper.

‘He is, dominus. You’ll hear all when we get you safely home.’

Marcus raised his voice as his man began to step away, understanding instinctively that Urban would have to remain close. Sure enough, Urban leaned in once more.

‘How?’ Marcus hissed. ‘He was in good health this morning. Are we under attack?’

Urban chewed his lip as he considered how to answer.

‘I don’t believe so,’ he said. ‘Though Albanus and I will give our lives to keep you safe. The doctor will tell us more when we return . . . That’s all I know, dominus.’

Urban vanished from the side opening before Marcus could think of a response. The young man slumped onto the padded seat. It was forty miles to the estate. Cormac knew they would be shaken until their bones were sore, just as they had been that morning. He had watched the sun rise on that journey, full of hope and confidence. All that had gone. He sat in numb silence as the carriage turned and both Urban and Albanus swung up to their seats. Cormac saw they had drawn their swords, keeping them ready. Whatever they had said, they believed there was a threat. He found himself staring out, looking for assassins as they clattered across stones, heading for the road home.

2

The sun was low on the horizon and the horses covered in salt rime by the time they reached the gates to the estate. Cormac wondered if Marcus saw them with new eyes now. The big lad had been brought to Cedri Magnae two years before, then fourteen and a strange mixture of arrogance and innocence. Cormac understood he was the third son of a different branch, but they would not have expected Marcus to inherit so quickly, raised above his brothers. He had no advisers around him and even his guards were retired men. Cormac assumed Urban and Albanus would be replaced, reflecting the young master's new status.

If Cormac had won his gradus, he might even have dreamed of advising Marcus Silanus himself. He sighed as the carriage drew to a halt. Urban jumped down to exchange words with the gate servants and they passed over a package of letters. Those men looked ruffled somehow, tear-stained, no doubt reflecting the entire staff as they reacted to the loss.

Cormac tried to feel grief, but it passed over him, almost

like birds overhead. Instead, he found himself wondering whether Marcus would let him retake the gradus. Somehow, looking at his sullen expression, Cormac doubted it. A leaden mood had settled on them both over hours of silence on the road. Cormac's fate was not in his own hands – that had been made very clear. He had been a fool ever to feel it had.

Urban tossed the packet into his lap as he climbed to the high step once more. Cormac riffled a thumb over the edge. It was one of his tasks to distribute letters when they arrived at the estate. Life went on, even in the midst of tragedy.

From the gate to the main house was over a mile further, rattling along a wide tree-lined road of dressed stones. Sheep and goats munched the edges while a dozen gardeners clipped and fed the soil. They bowed their heads as the carriage passed, showing respect to Marcus. He frowned, lost in his own thoughts.

Cormac could not help the way his heart lifted as the house came into view. This was the world he had known since his earliest years, after all. He may have been a slave, but he was home nonetheless.

The staff of the house, fully six hundred men and women, all perched or leaned in the great hall, crammed in and waiting to hear whatever they would be told. A few dozen had found a spot on the balcony that overlooked the rest, climbing stairs of black and ancient oak. It was rare to have so many up there, Cormac thought. Wood creaked and dust spilled, catching the lamplight in threads.

Cormac could hear sobbing. A few of the older ones grieved openly; others stared at nothing or shook their heads, fearing the way their lives had changed.

He'd woken in a perfectly ordered world that morning, confident as he'd emptied his bladder into a bleaching vat and wet his hair down to something like order. To sit in that hall with the sound of choked tears was as if he had stepped into someone else's life.

He knew everyone there – from the Gauls who tended the olive presses to the weaver families, to the divorced stonemason and his three lads. When Cormac was not at school, his work kept him in the house. He only saw men like the threshers at feasts and holy days, when they were given wine from the master's own store. He nodded to them even so, though they looked pinch-faced.

At harvest time, the entire household turned out to beat olive trees with long whips, dislodging the fruit that became bright green oil, the stuff of life. Out of season, Cormac knew the lads tended herds of estate sheep, living in huts far from the main house and driving their charges back and forth to streams and distant hills. The estate was a wealthy one, but it was not mere ornament. He'd seen the accounts.

Cormac realised he could recite the names of every man, woman and child there. He had written each one a hundred times, noting time off for sickness, or loans and earnings lodged in the estate coffers. He knew the carpenter Plautius sold carved figures of wood made in his spare time, saving the profit each month. Plautius would buy himself free soon, Cormac was certain. He knew them in ink as much as for kindness or bad temper – the few who might slip him an apple, or cuff his head as he passed. Yet that evening, nothing was the same.

For ten years, Cormac had woken at the same pre-dawn hour, heading to his ablutions and to dress for school. He

never ate then, not until the kitchen staff were up and cod-dling eggs still warm from the hens. No, it was his first duty to walk to the gate before dawn, waiting there to stare down the road to the city. He'd learned to remain until he heard the first bell sound in the stables before he dared to return. That was if he didn't want a whipping. The way old Antoninus told it, it was always his choice. Cormac could complete all his chores and work with a good heart and no complaints, or he could laze about like a Gaul and accept the lash as a punishment well earned. It was completely up to him, Antoninus said, a free decision.

Antoninus had found a snake in his bed the month before. The thing had writhed around his arm like a rope – though the bite had not been much. The lads in the fields suffered those same bites and always lived, so they'd told him. Yet Antoninus had made such a shrieking, he'd woken the whole house. Cormac had struggled to hide his laughter then.

He looked across the room, to where Antoninus waited near the door. The scribe's white hair was combed and oiled, Cormac noted, the man's tunic belted neatly. He looked in turn to the doorway, his jowly old face towards the light. It was like a painting of an expectant man, Cormac thought. He imagined a frame around the scene and smiled, before bitterness surged back. This was his home, but he was meant to have a new scroll of parchment in his hand. They would all know he'd come home without it. The shame burned.

On mornings when a herald did come from Rome, it was Cormac's task to collect orders and sealed letters and then to distribute them. Some he left for Antoninus to copy into the estate record. Personal letters always went to

the outer rooms of the dominus, while anything marked with the Silanus seal went to the old man's bedside, to the little tray there.

Cormac had always put on felt slippers to enter that part of the house. Silanus senior did not like to hear little mice, so Nartius claimed. The man's seneschal treated his master like a god walking the earth, as if Nartius was the only one who truly understood the needs of the dominus. Sleek with plump flesh and somewhat over forty years of age, Nartius had been a terrifying presence in Cormac's life since he had arrived at the estate. It was worrying not to see him in the hall with the others. His absence meant decisions were being made somewhere else.

To his very marrow, Cormac knew he should not be sitting idle at that moment, not while the sun set. In earlier years, he might have been spending that last hour of light greasing sandals, filling lamps or just copying lines of Horace while Antoninus nodded off in his chair. The senior scribe had been appalled in the beginning, as if Cormac's lack of letters was an offence against nature. He had laid on hard with the whip in those days, apparently under the belief he could thrash knowledge into a boy.

It had been two years before Cormac had even understood Antoninus too was a slave. The scribe may have had his airs and robes and bushy white eyebrows. He may have written with the fine hand of a scholar and spoken both Latin and Greek as well as his native Syrian tongue. Yet he was owned, just as Cormac was – just as Nartius was, for that matter, or Sophia, who ran the kitchens and fussed like a mother hen over the whole staff. Her own children had been born as little red scraps, passing out of the world as quickly as they came in. Cormac vaguely remembered

her husband. Cephas had managed Silanus estate horses and been a bright-eyed fellow, always ready to laugh. He'd been taken in some summer flux or other and yet in her grief, Sophia's affections had only grown, encompassing all the young ones on the estate. When Cormac thought the word 'mother', he thought of Sophia.

His own true family was barely a scent. He had a memory of white cliffs and red blood on the ground. He still dreamed of that sometimes. The slavers had seemed giants, men who laughed and shouted orders he could not understand. Cormac knew he had been taken on a ship that moved without wind. There had been crystals of salt on his skin and wood that creaked like a voice. He wished he could remember his mother and father as well, but all that was gone. With thousands of his people, he had been sold on some muddy dock in Gaul. Factors for the Silanus family had checked his mouth and groin and armpits for signs of disease, then paid bright silver coins for Cormac and sixty like him.

They'd been made to walk for a month after that, heading south from the coast with the rising sun on his left shoulder. Eight of them had caught some fever and been found cold. Four more had run and been hunted down, killed as an example to the rest. Cormac had known he wasn't the weakest then. It was a strange comfort, even in memory.

He had been a skinny little thing, with all his growing still to do. He'd plucked road grasses as he went, choosing ones he knew would be sweet. Those, with dry bread and a little salt fish, had kept him alive. His lips had cracked and his skin had burned, but he'd survived to reach the Silanus estate.

There were times when some drift of kitchen smoke would form the shadow of a woman singing softly, cooking for a man she loved . . .

Cormac looked up suddenly over the great hall. He'd been drowsing, he realised. The hall was warmer than usual with so many crammed in. No, it wasn't that. It was a sort of torpor in his thoughts, a heaviness that had weighed on him since the schoolroom. He slapped his own face suddenly, to keep him sharp.

The stable lads saw his movement. One of them kicked him in the back for spite. They were both a year or two younger, but they didn't look away when he glared, all red knees and rangy limbs. They already said he had taken on airs, that he thought he was better than them. He couldn't deny it.

Silence and stillness entered the hall, spreading like oil from the great doors to the rest of the household. Cormac knew a fountain bubbled out there, water drawn from lead pipes that narrowed to the width of a child's finger. In the sudden silence, he could hear it. Household slaves were meant to draw their water from a well in the back field, but they had all risked the whip to taste that cold spring, a wonder of the world that splashed over green bronze fishes.

The Silanus atrium was one of three, all ringed in columns of white stone. The walls there were painted to let visitors look onto scenes of slaves labouring in the fields. They looked strong, those workers, Cormac always thought. Strong and happy. The men laughed as they lifted great sheaves of wheat, while full-breasted women gathered lambs around their feet. Cormac liked to gaze on those images in stolen moments, usually rushing from

the stores back to his little alcove, where his desk and his copying waited. He . . .

He blinked as the household rose to greet whoever was sweeping in, through that atrium, into the Silanus main hall. He'd drifted off again! He could not slap his face without drawing more attention, so bit the inside of his lower lip, hard enough to make his eyes water. What was this sleepy state? To have a chance to appeal his *gradus scriptorum* he needed to have his wits about him. He could make a claim to have his unfinished sheets collected and marked, to have the extraordinary events of that morning taken into account. They would grant it to a Silanus, he was certain. Marcus knew what it meant to him.

'Rise for his most august honour, Senator Decimus Junius Silanus, Gens Junii Silanus, Censor of Rome, beloved friend and most trusted of Emperor Tiberius.'

Cormac felt another kick between his shoulder blades as he came off the bench and stood. He didn't dare turn as a senator's retinue came into the hall. Nartius entered like their herald, Cormac saw, the man swollen almost to bursting with his own importance. The old master's seneschal took up a position just a few paces in front of Cormac, head bowed and hands clasped as if at prayer.

Silanus slaves and staff edged back there, leaving the centre stones free. Cormac watched in awe as legionaries in full armour took up positions where they could glare at that crowd. If they were at all nervous in the presence of so many working men and women, it did not show in their expressions.

Scribes too were coming in, strangers with ink-marked hands. Watching them, Cormac thought to slip his left thumb between the next two fingers, so the tip poked out.

He held that up behind his back, wagging the thumb so that the stable lads would see. It resembled female parts, so he had been told – a terrible insult to men. He wasn't entirely sure how accurate the gesture was, but it provoked a hiss from behind. He dipped his head, satisfied with that small rebellion.

On the main floor, the staff of the estate watched as an actual senator came among them. This was a man who had talked with consuls, even the emperor, a man who strode the halls of the Palatine. His father warmed a second seat in the senate, as *his* father and a dozen generations had done before.

Those calm eyes had witnessed legions on the march, perhaps commanded them. Cormac felt his heart racing. This was Marcus' own father, come to oversee the inheritance fate and foresight had granted his line. Cormac had to crane to see the wide-shouldered son standing abashed in his father's presence. Ahead of him, Nartius rocked up and down on the balls of his feet. The seneschal's hair was combed into a great slick, like crow wings that met at the back.

Cormac had known his master was not of the main line of the Silanus family. It hadn't mattered in any real sense. It would have been like comparing one mountain peak with another, while standing in foothills far below. Yet the one who looked around at six hundred slaves resembled the man whose letters Cormac had distributed. This Silanus was the eldest of three brothers and a sister. The senator still had dark in his hair, though it was fading to an iron grey. The gaze too had a certain hardness. From the way his son Marcus stood with downcast eyes, Cormac was suddenly pleased to be a few rows back, with Nartius blocking

sight of him. If this was the oldest son of the Junii Silani, he was a god amongst men, commanding more wealth and power than Cormac could imagine.

‘You will all have heard the sad news,’ Decimus Silanus said, nodding as if answering his own words. ‘My dear brother has passed from the world. As you know, your master had no children of his own loins. He adopted his nephew Marcus as his son and heir, though we had hoped for more years . . . It falls to me to arrange his affairs, as the most senior of my father’s sons. This estate will pass therefore into my hands, in accordance with statute and natural law . . .’

The clipped voice broke off as one of his own servants shifted, touching a hand to his mouth as he made a soft, throat-clearing sound. Cormac watched as the senator became rather more human in his visible irritation.

‘What is it?’

‘There is a sealed will, dominus,’ the man said. ‘I found it in the private rooms, in the desk there.’

He held up a scroll, marked with a broken coin of blue wax. Cormac knew it was the real thing. He had seen Antoninus prepare copies over the years, consigning older versions to the fire.

‘I will attend to it this evening,’ Silanus said, waving it off like a fly. ‘I don’t doubt my brother intended some minor bequests. As head of the family, I will decide which ones to honour.’ He spoke with certainty, but still paused, Cormac saw, a question hanging in the air.

His personal servant shifted again, uncomfortably.

‘There is the seal of the imperial record house on the copy, dominus,’ he said at last.

Cormac watched the senator frown. The news of an

official copy did not please him, that was clear. Whatever they were, the old man's instructions could not just be ignored. Cormac was somehow pleased about that. Perhaps it was rare for the senator to encounter some obstacle to his authority. Cormac could hardly imagine.

The servant who had spoken was one of those with ink-darkened fingers, Cormac noted. He felt an odd sort of pride to see one of his own standing up to a senator, an anointed member of the nobilitas! Yet the law bound all men, whether their estates were high or low. The thought gave Cormac a feeling of warmth in his chest. This was Rome, he thought.

'Very well,' the senator said, his mouth even tighter than before. His son actually flinched when that gaze fell on him.

'And where is the one who found my brother?' the senator added, casting his voice across the hall.

Cormac expected Nartius or one of the others to raise their hand. Yet he saw the seneschal looking around with the rest.

On his return to the estate, Cormac had taken the last batch of letters into the rooms where the master had been laid out. The bedchamber had been very still and he'd only glanced at the figure lying there, breath caught like a briar. The flesh had been yellow, he recalled, a dark ochre that had no great resemblance to life. The mouth had sagged, with eyes that looked sunken. Something had been taken from the man Cormac had called dominus for ten years.

Cormac felt a hand take his arm. He pulled away from instinct, making Nartius grunt in anger. He didn't let go though. Instead, Nartius dragged him from the crowd as if landing a fish. In a single motion, Cormac was plucked to the front, half-sprawling and rubbing his elbow.

‘You are the one?’ the senator snapped at him. ‘You discovered your master? You found my dear brother dead?’

Cormac had never spoken to one like him. He shook his head in awe.

‘No, I was in the city, d-dominus,’ he stammered. ‘I came back this evening, w-with your s-son.’ He glanced at Marcus, but the boy stared at the floor.

‘Come closer,’ the senator said, beckoning.

Cormac did as he was told. Should he kneel? Old Antoninus knew the rules of how to address his betters. None of them came to mind as Cormac stood before a man of severe Roman dignity. He felt his tongue cleave to the roof of his mouth.

‘You are a house slave?’ the senator asked.

Cormac nodded, his throat too dry.

‘And you attended my brother?’

Cormac shook his head, quite unable to make a sound. On normal days, he had brought the letters, but he had not been there when the dominus died. It seemed too complicated to explain with this man glaring like an accusation.

The senator looked to his servants in frustration. Cormac reminded himself to breathe when he realised he had forgotten. He drew in a lungful, feeling his face redden. He might have answered then, but an impact from behind made him stagger forward. He glanced back in dismay to see Nartius had stepped in. The big man had always been free with his hands. The unfairness stung as much as the blow.

‘I am a scribe, dominus,’ Cormac managed at last. ‘I carried letters in this morning and this evening, but in between I was taking my gradus in the city . . .’

The senator waved him to silence.

‘And you are the one who discovered my brother? Who found him in death?’

‘N-no, dominus,’ Cormac replied. ‘I just c-carried the letters.’

The senator was perfect, somehow. From the man’s new sandals to the kilt of leather over cloth that he wore, to a tunic woven to a design . . . of a boar. The house crest in white, of course. The face too had a sort of nobility, showing no marks of disease or starvation. Many of the house slaves had pockmarks or scars from some old abscess or ulcer. They lost teeth and suffered through the agues of childhood, usually until something burst. It left a few cruelly marked, but there was no sign of anything like that in the senator. This Silanus was clear-eyed and noble in aspect, taller than most and still strong despite his years. Cormac knew in that moment that he could follow such a man into battle, that he would give his life for one glorious moment in defence of the Silanus family. It would be an honourable death and . . .

‘The last letters, was it?’ the senator said, trying to understand.

Cormac nodded once more, though he didn’t see how it was relevant.

‘Very well. Take him up,’ the senator went on. ‘I’ll attend as he is put to the question.’

Cormac felt his mouth open in confusion. He saw Marcus turn as if to object, then look down at his feet once more. His father allowed no opposition, that was clear.

The senator gestured to the six hundred men and women gathered in that place, looking faintly exasperated. ‘Until then, continue your usual duties, whatever they are. Understood? Good. I will cremate my brother tomorrow, then read his will.’

The head of the Silanus family looked at Nartius, accepting the man's bulk and strength as useful.

'Show me to some private room. I'll need a fire. Bring the boy.'

Nartius bowed in reply, pulling Cormac along in a grip as implacable as Roman law. Cormac didn't struggle. He saw Sophia from the kitchens standing by the door, fingers over her mouth and eyes shining with tears. He wanted to speak to her, but Nartius was shoving him past. What was happening? Put to the question? Who *had* found the body? He had been in the city! Cormac had only ever known one estate, with a master who hardly intruded on the life of the scribes working for him. Nartius was a greater presence in Cormac's life than the old Silanus had ever been. The grip on his arm felt real enough, but he could not understand what was happening.

3

Cormac remained silent as he was taken out of the hall. Every year he could remember had been spent in that house. For all his dislike of smooth-faced Nartius, he still trusted the man as one of the senior household, a member of the adult group who carried authority in their every glance and action. Nor was it particularly strange to be grabbed and hurried along so quickly his feet barely touched the ground. That sort of handling had been part of his life from his earliest recollection. If a pot of soup spilled in the house, or something valuable was knocked over, Cormac found himself dragged or cuffed to see to the mess. He was usually left alone then, with a broom or a bucket and cloths.

As he'd reached manhood, he'd hardly noticed how long it had been since something like that had actually happened. These days when a pile of fence posts toppled over, a dozen other boys were set to work before anyone came looking for Cormac. With the approach of his gradus scriptorum, he'd moved up in the hierarchy of the estate without being fully aware of it.

Nartius shoved him into a chair and Cormac blinked around. This was one of the storerooms, with stoppered amphorae of wine all along one wall. It wasn't a spot he knew well as his duties rarely took him there. He sneezed as dust got up his nose.

Cormac watched as two slaves he knew carried in a brazier on wooden poles. He supposed they'd been told to fetch it from the kitchens, but the room was already warm. One of the senator's scribes splayed his hands before it even so, warming black fingertips over the iron. The kitchen boys did not look at Cormac, vanishing like mice as soon as they were dismissed. The heat made the air shimmer, Cormac noted. He could feel it on one bare leg.

Another stranger peered down at Cormac like a hawk examining prey. This one wore a skullcap and a belt set with pouches. Cormac wrinkled his nose and knew him for a doctor before he even spoke. Men went to those when they were ready to die, as he'd heard it. Or to have rotting teeth pulled with pliers of black iron. Healthy men stayed away from the caste, with their powders, prayers and chants. That was what Antoninus said, anyway – and he was old enough to know.

Before a word could be said, Senator Silanus came into the storeroom, looking round in distaste. Bare-armed and brown-legged, he brought a sense of sunlight, a clean scent of new oil or pine sap. The noble Roman seemed to bustle even when he came to rest, as if Cormac's very existence was one more thing of a thousand for him to deal with that evening.

'Well?' Silanus said. 'Let's get *on* with it.' He waved vaguely at the fire. 'Manus! Stop your fussing.' He addressed the one Cormac thought of as a doctor. 'Use

the irons, so I can say I followed the law. Oh, by Jove, I am surrounded by fools! Here! Like *so*!

He crossed to the brazier and took two rods out of the coals, examining them and putting them back. Staff used them to stoke the fire, Cormac knew. Those born in Rome seemed to feel the cold more than he ever did. It was a strange inheritance, but he could bear winters better than almost anyone on the estate, even the Gauls.

The senator's other hand rested briefly on a pair of tongs, then left those in the coals. Cormac watched it all with a sense of rising apprehension.

'Dominus? I don't understand . . . what is happening,' he said. Odd how he couldn't quite take a breath. He felt light-headed from the effort of forcing words out past a blockage in his throat.

'Summon courage, boy. You are to be tortured. Ah, you understand that! Good.'

'B-but . . . I have done nothing wrong!'

The senator sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb. Cormac hated to vex such a man, one so clearly important. The gods alone knew what matters of state had been postponed for him to be in that little room. Yet, he had to interrupt. There had been some sort of mistake, that was clear.

'A slave is a ward of the estate,' Nartius said suddenly, obsequious in his desire to please. 'Like a child, though of any age.'

Cormac craned his neck to see.

'I don't need to be tortured though . . .' he said, braver with the bully he knew.

'You have no say in it,' Nartius said with a shrug. 'If you were a free man, it would be different, but the law says

slaves must be compelled. It says they *have* to be tortured and made to speak the truth.'

Cormac felt his mouth open in fear. His gaze slid to the fire, where the irons were still heating.

'There is no need. I will speak only the truth, I promise,' he said.

Nartius shook his head, but it was the senator who replied.

'Slaves don't make promises, boy. I see my younger brother kept a slack house! Whatever you say, whatever you believe to be the truth, you are still Silanus property. You have no honour on which to base an oath, no more than the chair you sit on. No, you will be compelled with fire, until I am satisfied you have told all you know and held nothing back. Do you understand?'

Cormac began to rise and Nartius laid a meaty hand on his shoulder, pressing him into the seat. When he glanced up it was to see the seneschal was sweating. Was Nartius the one who had discovered their master? Cormac wondered. There was fear in his eyes, right enough. The seneschal's voice was sickly sweet when he spoke again.

'He will sit quiet, dominus. Though he may flinch from it. I would have him bound, if it please the master.'

The senator nodded and Nartius drew a cord from under his tunic. He produced an eating blade, cutting the string in two. The big man knelt then to bind Cormac's wrists behind the chair. He came back to the fore and slapped Cormac's ankles together.

'Sit still,' Nartius hissed when Cormac tried to rise once more, an animal resistance despite his bonds. The senator was inspecting the irons again and Nartius moved with quick efficiency, tying knots hard and tight.

‘I don’t know anything,’ Cormac whispered, pleading. Nartius rolled his eyes.

‘Don’t curse, or lie. Don’t accuse another, or say anything the master might take as an insult. Or you won’t leave this place. Underst—’

The whispering voice broke off as the senator returned with an iron in each hand. The tips were gold, crusted in black. The doctor reached to take one and Silanus swayed aside, making the man flinch. He was like a child with a new toy, unwilling to share.

‘Bare his chest,’ the senator said.

There was an unpleasant gleam in his eye and Cormac could only stare and breathe, fast and shallow. There was no one in the world who could come and save him. The old dominus would have stopped it, but that Silanus was dead and open-mouthed, his flesh being wrapped and doused in sweet oil for his own flames.

‘Ask me anything, dominus! I won’t lie, on my oath!’ Cormac said desperately. ‘The master lived when I left the morning letters. He had passed when I brought the evening post. That is all I know. Please!’

‘How full of yourself you are!’ the senator said in wonder. ‘My father always said his middle son ruined slaves, treated them too gently so that they spoiled. I see no tattoos on you, even! That can be put right, at least. I see now what my father meant. Boy, slaves make no oaths. You’ll take me through every detail, but at my convenience, not your own. Like . . . so.’

He jabbed with an iron that smoked as it moved through air. Cormac screamed as it touched. He looked in horror at the thing trailing across his flesh, making skin split and sizzle. Then the pain hit and he stopped screaming,

stopped breathing, just stared beyond that room, every tendon showing like wires under his skin.

The sun rose in a clear blue sky the following morning, as if nothing had changed. Cormac sat on a bench dragged out from the main house, feeling ill. When they had released him at last, Nartius had taken him to the kitchens. Dawn had lit the house as Sophia poured sour wine on his wounds, then dabbed on goose fat. Those white curds melted back to oil from heat still in his skin.

Cormac winced as he tried to raise his face to the warmth, feeling something crack and bleed. He'd never known pain like it, not in all the whippings, cuffs and boots helping him on his way. Yet in the midst, he knew he'd lost more than just hair or skin and blood. He did not yet know what it was exactly, only that it had been in him – and it had gone. He would have answered any question in perfect truth, but they had still hurt him.

Not a dozen paces from where he sat, the funeral pyre was lit. Cormac shrank away as flames sprang to life and wood spat and crackled. His chest could not bear even a whisper of heat, not then. Yet he made himself watch as priests of Jupiter and Pluto sacrificed animals and implored their patron gods to welcome a great man to Elysium. Those slaughtered bulls and geese would become the feast that afternoon, Cormac thought. Priests were always well fed.

Some of the household were sobbing by the pyre, shedding tears for a man who had always treated them with kindness. Cormac felt his lip curl for them. He whispered how much he hated them all, his pain like the oil that fed the flames. It gave him comfort, though his hands trembled and he could hardly breathe.

When they had finished their vigil, when the old man's flesh was left to burn to ashes, the new master had given word for them to assemble in the hall, where the will would be read. After that, Cormac knew another evening would come. The estate would sleep and rise, the rain would make the fields green, but it would not be the same. He had been blind before. The burning irons had woken him. If he'd had a blade . . .

He felt a cuff across the top of his head, perfectly judged so that his vision flashed white for an instant. He began to rise, though his tunic stuck and tore free, making him gasp.

Antoninus was there, the senior scribe. Cormac hesitated, confused. Were they all his enemies? Was his entire life a lie?

'Look away, boy,' Antoninus breathed by his ear. 'You were staring at the senator. If he sees that anger in you, he could order you whipped or castrated – even killed. I could not save you then. Understand? Keep your gaze off your betters.'

The corpse on the pyre was revealed as logs burned, a dark figure at the heart of the flames. Cormac shuddered, knowing the advice was good. He felt tears come and it was more that Antoninus had thought to protect him than anything else. He hardened himself with an effort. If he accepted kindness, from anyone, his shield would crumble and he would have nothing. The old scribe leaned over to look him in the eye, but Cormac just stared at the ground, until he felt the presence leave.

Smoke stretched to clouds overhead, thick and black with oil. The body dropped from sight as branches beneath gave way. It would be reduced to ash and someone would

have the task of collecting the residue and scraping it all into a pot for burial.

The crowd was heading back into the house, still exchanging memories. The one he thought of as ‘the dominus’ had been a good master compared to some. Cormac heard that said more than once as he rose to go with them. No one stood too close, though they nudged one another and pointed him out. He folded his arms over the burns, feeling his tunic stick to melted skin.

In groups and alone, every member of the Silanus household took places in the great hall. They blocked enough light to make an unnatural gloom, one he found comforting. Cormac wondered if he would run away as he waited. Not while his wounds made it hard to move. No, he needed to heal, to grow strong. By summer though.

There were men in Rome who hunted slaves with dogs, so he’d heard. They followed a scent and tracked those who ran, across field and stone and even river. Every slave had heard the stories, of the terrible punishments that followed. Some of it had to be true, surely? Perhaps it was all a lie, as his life had been a lie before. Perhaps they were chained only by fear and there were no dogs and brutal men to chase them.

The senator’s presence brought silence once again. Cormac wondered how he had ever seen him as a god amongst men. This Silanus was cruel, he understood that. Not noble, not some better clay. Just a man. He did not seem to be in a good mood either. Cormac watched as the senator waved for his clerk to go ahead. The entire staff grew still.

‘The will has all the correct seals from imperial records, witnessed and recorded there . . .’ the man began. ‘There

are a few private lines intended for his heir, Marcus Junius Silanus, son to Decimus Junius Silanus . . . the entire estate including all holdings, and property . . . the mines, the house in the city . . . Here, this part applies: “It is my final decree that my slaves are to be freed on my death. By my will, they shall be released in that moment from all debt owed to me or the Silanus family. I ask only that they light a lamp to me on the anniversary of my passing, each year. Freedom is a trial, but it is also a glory. Rome understands – and you will understand. Freedmen and freedwomen can rise in our city, as they never can in Assyria or Parthia or Egypt. Use this gift well – and if you would, I ask only that you pray for my soul.””

The words were read in a monotone, almost as a dirge. Cormac felt as if he’d been punched. There was a murmur of astonished reaction in the crowd as they looked to one another – husbands and wives, stable boys and sewing women. Cormac saw Sophia bury her face in her hands, shaking. He could still feel fever rising in him, let in by the burns he had endured. Yet his thoughts sharpened. He stepped forward and Nartius was a moment too slow, though the seneschal hissed at his back for him to stop.

‘We were free from the moment the old master died?’ Cormac asked.

The senator looked as if he’d eaten a bad olive, a flush spilling up his throat. His scribe began to reply, but Senator Decimus Silanus spoke over him, addressing them all.

‘Free to starve? Yes. Though you have all enjoyed another meal and shelter since then. I should demand payment to settle that account! This was . . . unexpected. My brother was not usually a sentimental man. Perhaps his mind was deranged in his final days, I cannot say. It does