

# All Roads Lead to Murder

## Chapter 1

I saw the slave girl stumble and knew that the cup of wine she was carrying was going to land on her master.

We were eating a hurried lunch on the side of the road between Ephesus and Smyrna, finding what shade we could. This girl's owner, Lucius Cornutus, more than anyone else in our travelling party, had been making demands on his slaves. And he insisted that they stand while he ate, except for the one female that he seemed to treat as a kind of concubine or mistress. She sat at his feet. Cornutus and another of our company, Tiberius Saturninus, had been throwing dice while they ate.

When the cup hit him, on the left side of his back, Cornutus leaped up from his camp stool, twisted around, and grabbed the girl. "You stupid cow!" He drew back his arm and the girl steeled herself for the blows that were about to rain on her. His concubine tugged at his arm, but he jerked away from her.

"Stop! Do not hit her!" The voice of a woman, one of those who had joined our caravan in Ephesus, rang out in Greek from off to my left, sending a chill up and down me, like a battle trumpet.

Her imperious tone and her arm outstretched as if to cast a spell, more than the words themselves, I think, brought Cornutus up short. Without letting go of the girl, he glared at the woman, then dropped his eyes. I had flinched the same way every time I spoke with this priestess or witch, or whatever she was. She stood tall, with a square face, long, wild black hair streaked with gray, and burning eyes that could buckle the sturdiest knees.

In the background I also noticed that the German merchant, a big strapping man who had been with us since we left Antioch, had his hand under his cloak. On a dagger, I suspected. "There's going to be bloodshed," my travelling companion Cornelius Tacitus said under his breath. "The pot is just about to boil."

I didn't want anything to delay our return to Rome, so I decided to intervene. I stood up and stepped between Cornutus and the witch, facing him, not her.

"Listen, Cornutus," I said, "it was an accident. We're all tired. Why don't you show the girl some compassion?"

Cornutus let go of the girl, who slumped to the ground. The German withdrew his hand and the witch lowered her arm with a clanking of bracelets.

"Show compassion to a slave? Friend Pliny," Cornutus said sarcastically, for I was by no means his friend, "this little cow just doused me." He tugged at his wet tunic like an orator in court showing a bloodstain to a jury.

I glanced at the girl and wondered why he kept calling her a cow. She was actually quite lovely, a blonde with eyes as green as young acorns, a slender face and arms, skin as milky white as a statue of Galatea. About fifteen, I judged, six years or so younger than myself.

Cornutus took a step toward me, thrusting his broad face into mine. "If I don't punish her, what will the others think?" He jerked his head toward the eight other slaves who were travelling with him. "Will they decide it's all right to punch me, kick me, perhaps slip a knife between my ribs while I sleep?"

He was putting every Roman slave-owner's nightmare into words. As the old proverb says, "You have as many enemies as you have slaves." We can't live without our slaves, and yet they heavily outnumber us. Fear of punishment is the only real control we have over them.

"Your own slaves might get ideas," Cornutus said, raising a hand toward my four male slaves, who were sitting apprehensively in the shade of our wagons, alongside the three slaves belonging to Tacitus.

"The girl meant you no harm, Cornutus," I said, determined to stand my ground against a man almost twice my age and infinitely more menacing. I felt like I was frozen in front of an angry dog. Any movement or sign of fear and he would pounce. "She was doing the task you assigned her. We all make mistakes. Things happen that we can't control." The fear constricting my throat made it difficult to form the more eloquent, rhetorically balanced sentences in which I typically try to speak.

Cornutus put his big paw on my shoulder. His leathery face broke into a parody of a smile, like a wine-skin splitting open. "Friend Pliny, do you really consider a slave to be your fellow human being?" The sarcasm flowed over me like the heat gushing from the hot room of a bath house.

"No, I consider all human beings to be my fellow slaves," I replied, relieved to be able to turn the argument so neatly to a philosophical point, and with a nice chiasmus thrown in to boot. "Recall what Seneca said: 'Fortune holds equal sway over us all.' It is this girl's bad fortune to be the slave, your good fortune to be the master. Things could as easily have been reversed."

Another member of our travelling party stood and took a step forward out of the shade. An older man, Jewish I suspected. He and his companion had kept largely to themselves since joining us at Ephesus. At the moment I couldn't recall his name. In a calm voice he said, "Young Pliny is right, Cornutus. In God's sight there is no slave, no free."

Cornutus laughed, a sharp snort. It was a chilling sound, even on a warm spring day. "So you worship a blind god, do you?" He swept his gaze over the entire group. "You're a pack of fools, all of you." To the girl he said, "I'll deal with you tonight." He shot a glance around the circle, daring anyone to contradict him again.

The girl's face went pale and she looked at me as though pleading for help. How had I not noticed that face before today? There had been dozens of people, perhaps a hundred in all, in and out of our caravan since we left Antioch, but none of them could have compared to the face of this woman-child. She was at that exquisite age when most Roman girls are getting married and yet haven't quite left behind their girlish innocence. She might hug her father or her husband with equal pleasure on her part, but their reactions would be quite different. And there was some quality lurking beneath the dirt on her face from where she had fallen. Just as you can go into a tavern and find a mural coated with soot, but you know that beneath the grime there is a masterpiece, even so I thought I perceived a special quality \_\_ a kind of hidden divinity \_\_ in her.

Cornutus jerked the girl to her feet and shoved her toward his wagon. His concubine put a protective arm around the

girl's shoulders. The rest of us loaded back into our wagons to resume the journey.

"Thank you for intervening," a woman's voice said behind me. I spun around to find myself facing the witch. Her voice may have softened slightly, but not her countenance. "That monster has no right to beat an innocent child."

"She's his slave," I said. "He has the right to do whatever he pleases with her. I stepped in because I thought there was going to be a serious altercation, not to protect a slave girl."

She sneered. "By the goddess, you Romans are all alike. You arrogant bastards think you can run roughshod over the rest of the world. There will be a day of reckoning, and it will come when you least expect it." She stalked away to her wagon, bracelets and amulets jingling.

"Maybe you should have stayed out of it," Tacitus said.

"I think you're right. I've just made everybody a little bit angrier. And I don't believe we helped the girl at all. If I had kept quiet, Cornutus would probably have slapped her a few times. Nothing she hasn't endured before. Now, whatever punishment he inflicts on her tonight will be doubled and redoubled by his frustration at the delay and his resentment of our interference."

As his slaves packed up, Cornutus bent over to pick up his winnings from the dice game. Saturninus had slunk back to his own wagon during the turmoil over the girl. Cornutus shook the coins in his hand and turned toward Saturninus. "Tiberius Saturninus, you thieving scoundrel! There was at least another twenty sesterces in this pile. Cough it up."

Saturninus skulked forward and flung the coins at him.

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"That's the last milestone before Smyrna," Tacitus said. "It was erected during the eleventh year of Claudius' reign." Since we set out from Antioch, twenty-three days earlier, he had read every inscription on every milestone we'd passed. At least twenty of the damn things every day. And he acted interested in what they said \_\_ who was consul and how many times the emperor had been granted tribunician power \_\_ and what they revealed about when a particular stretch of road was built or repaired. He sounded more like a historian than one of Rome's brightest young orators.

"At least we'll get to the city well before dark," I said. "We'll have a chance to find an inn while we can still see something."

"Are you sure you don't know someone here that we could stay with?"

"Regrettably, no." And I truly did regret it. I wanted to be nowhere in earshot when Cornutus unleashed his fury on that poor slave girl. "My uncle didn't know anyone in Smyrna."

"So this time he's your uncle," Tacitus said.

"I should make up my mind, shouldn't I?" My uncle, Pliny, had adopted me in his will. When he died four years ago while trying to rescue people from the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, I became his son and heir and took on his name in addition to my father's family name, Caecilius. I am now Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, to give it in its ponderous fullness. Sometimes I wonder if I can stand up under the weight of it. My mother \_\_\_ Pliny's sister \_\_\_ and I lived in Pliny's home after my father died. Pliny had always carefully insisted that I call him `uncle'. He was very generous to me, a father in every way. That was how I thought of him, but a deeply ingrained habit was hard to break, so sometimes now I call him `uncle' and occasionally `father'.

"I'm afraid my father had no connections here," I corrected myself.

"That's a shame," Tacitus said. "His friends in Ephesus certainly treated us royally. Well, staying in an inn won't be all bad. There's always the possibility of an accommodating serving girl." He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Or boy."

I glanced at him disdainfully. His sexual versatility was the one thing about him that made me uncomfortable. We had met in Antioch as this caravan was forming for the journey to Rome. Pooling our resources, we bought some better wagons than either of us could afford by himself. I had found myself enjoying his company before I became aware of his sexual predilections. There was nothing about his manners or his public life to suggest such inclinations. He had a wife, the daughter of the illustrious Julius Agricola, waiting for him at home. He was three years older than I and in the area of relations with sexual partners resented my attempts to stand on the higher moral ground.

"Don't look at me like that," he said. "There's nothing wrong with finding a bit of pleasure anywhere you can. Socrates and Plato and all those other Greeks you profess to admire did it all the time. Beauty is everywhere. Male, female \_\_\_ what's the difference beyond an extra appendage or an extra orifice here and there?"

"But your wife . . . ."

His waved his hand tiredly. "Aristocratic Roman women have had all the fun bred out of them, my wife being the perfect example. I appreciate the . . . earthiness of peasants and the servile class. They've watched animals couple. They've slept in the same room with their parents and siblings, so there's no false modesty about them."

On this point I suppose he's incorrigible. I had made it clear that I didn't share his inclination. We had enough other points of common interest that our friendship was blossoming rapidly. I decided to drop the issue and turned my attention to the scenery.

The highway which we were following, the Via Sebaste, runs almost due north from Ephesus until it veers northwest to skirt the range of hills at whose base Smyrna sits, at the head of a long, narrow bay. The land is fertile and, in early spring, the fields had been recently plowed and crops sown. With an early spate of warm weather a few of them were already covered by a green mist of tender shoots. As we neared the coast I could smell a hint of sea breeze, a bracing sensation when you're safe on land. I enjoy watching the ocean. But, may it please the gods, I hope never to look on it from the vantage point of a ship again. I made the outbound trip to Syria by boat; with time I trust the nightmares will fade. I did entrust most of my goods to Neptune for the return journey. For my precious self I preferred to keep solid ground under my feet.

Tacitus and I were returning from Syria, where I served as a military tribune with the legions and he had been on the governor's staff. All Roman men hold such posts if they have any ambitions for a career in public service in the city. It had been a tense year. The dust from the Jewish revolt in the neighboring province of Judaea, which ended ten years ago, had not yet entirely settled. Many refugees from the destroyed city of Jerusalem had settled in Antioch and other cities of Syria. Those people cherish their grudges like a peasant guards the last embers of his fire so he can fan them to flame on another day. I wonder if there will ever be true peace in that part of the empire.

We were travelling in a caravan, of course. Tacitus and I had a wagon and driver for ourselves and another for our slaves and baggage. There were nine travellers, plus slaves, who had been together all the way from Antioch. Others had joined us for a time and then dropped out as they reached their destinations. Except for a few days of rain, it had been an uneventful journey and we had made good time. But, even under the best of conditions, travel is hard. Tempers can wear thin on these long journeys. Without the civilizing force of a city and magistrates, people sometimes resort to violence to settle disputes.

Most of our travelling companions were congenial enough, or at least not dangerous. There were two others who, like ourselves, had been on government service in Syria: Tiberius Saturninus and Gaius Sempronius, a couple of complete nonentities. The only thing that made Saturninus stand out in a crowd was that he wouldn't admit he was bald and combed his hair up from the edges to cover his glistening pate. Whenever the wind blew hard he appeared to have a horse's mane billowing out from his head.

One fellow, Lysimachus, the most tiresome of the lot, was a travelling philosopher/teacher of some sect, an offshoot of Platonism. He wore a long white beard and gloried in the sound of his own voice. I guess those are the two essential criteria for being a philosopher. He wasn't an old man, just one whose hair turned white at an early age. He was on his way to Athens, to bask in the glow of walking where Plato had walked, a life-long ambition of his. I didn't spoil his anticipation by telling him how much the city has declined since those halcyon days. It bears as much resemblance to Plato's Athens as a grandmother does to the girl you were in love with all those years ago.

The merchant, a huge German who had mastered Latin and learned some Greek, was our biggest encumbrance, with several wagons laden with merchandise. He had shipped most of his goods by boat, but these items \_\_ silks and spices from India \_\_ he said he couldn't trust to the whims of Neptune. I had to sympathize. This humorless fellow had Latinized his German name \_\_ which was Garl or Karl or some guttural growl almost impossible for a civilized tongue to form \_\_ and added a Roman praenomen, dubbing himself Marcus Carolus. To the Roman ear the effect was comic, but I doubt if many people laughed about it to his face.

Two of our party, a pair of self-important toadies named Rhascuporis and Orophernes, were representing their city, some backwater east of Antioch, on an embassy to Rome, asking permission to build a temple to the emperor Domitian. They kept working on their speeches, practicing their delivery during our rest stops. Tacitus and I both have already achieved some renown in Rome for our oratory, even at our young ages. It was all we could do not to laugh out loud as we listened to their rustic grandiloquence. They are sure to be mocked and parodied for days after their appearance before the senate.

Dominating the mood of our party in some ways was Lucius Cornutus, who had just finished a year on the staff of the governor of Syria. Tacitus had told me stories about the lavish dinners Cornutus was fond of hosting. When a man who handles the government's money entertains on that scale, suspicions do begin to circulate. Rumors followed Cornutus like a pack of hungry dogs trailing after a butcher's cart.

Several parties who had left Antioch with us concluded their journey in Ephesus. There we were joined by three other groups setting out from that city. All three of those parties aroused my suspicions, though for different reasons.

The first consisted of two men, travelling without slaves and driving their own wagon. They kept themselves apart from the rest of us. One was tall, with dark hair, and appeared to be about forty. The other \_\_\_ the one who had spoken up to Cornutus at lunch \_\_\_ was shorter and older, about sixty I guessed. They took the last position in our train, and seemed often to be deep in whispered conversations. I had caught occasional references to some kind of assembly, ekklesia in Greek. From their prayers at meals and what appeared to be secret signs they were using, I thought they might be Jews, or at least Greeks attracted to Judaism. There are a lot of such folks. They profess to admire Jewish ways, but not enough to undergo circumcision. I was quite surprised that the older of these men injected himself into my confrontation with Cornutus. Jews are typically misanthropic and keep to themselves.

Also unsettling was the appearance of another group, comprised of six women, with no male escorts and led by the one I thought of as the wild-haired witch. She wore an amazing number of bracelets, necklaces, and amulets. Their lead wagon was painted black and carried occult markings in bright colors on its sides. Ephesus is a center of magic and superstitious practices. `Ephesian books' is a phrase used all over the empire to denote compilations of spells, even when they're not from Ephesus. They conversed with us in passable Greek but among themselves resorted to some Eastern babble.

But the most troublesome party who joined us in Ephesus was one man, Quintus Marcellus Justus, whom I immediately recognized as a prot?g? of Marcus Aquilius Regulus. If prot?g? is the proper term for a scoundrel- and rogue-in-training.

Marcellus' presence troubled me because Regulus is one of the most notorious figures in Rome. Anyone who doesn't know him knows of him. Everyone fears him; no one respects him. Regulus would describe himself as an advocate, one who speaks in court on behalf of those who lack the skill or confidence to present their cases effectively. Most of the aristocracy in Rome serve their friends and family dependents in that capacity. It's one of the obligations that weigh against the privileges of wealth and class. I made my first appearance as an advocate at the age of eighteen. So, admittedly, Regulus does nothing out of the ordinary by speaking for friends and clients. But he oversteps the bounds with his flamboyant \_\_\_ I might even say outrageous \_\_\_ manner in court and his insistence on handling the most sensational cases.

More troublesome is Regulus' sideline. He will use any means to get people indebted to him. He employs a network of spies who feed him information that he is able to turn into sometimes ruinous charges against wealthy people. An accusation of treason is his most profitable ploy. He has been doing this for over twenty years, since the days of the emperor Nero, and has built up a vast fortune for himself in the process, due to our government's policy of rewarding an informer with a quarter of whatever is confiscated from a convicted person. He debases himself even further by engaging in what aristocratic Romans sneer at as legacy-hunting, the process of courting wealthy childless people in order to get oneself written into their wills.

From what I had heard and observed in Rome, Marcellus was an unusually adept pupil. Regulus doted on him more like a son than a student, and Marcellus picked up Regulus' rapacious inclinations and thieving techniques as readily as I hope any future son of mine will someday follow my example to a better end.

"We're almost there," Tacitus said. I turned my attention back to the scenery.

The highway began to broaden and a pedestrian pathway appeared alongside it, sure signs that we were approaching a fair-sized city. Then we rounded Mt. Mastusia and could see the acropolis, on the east side of Smyrna, crowned by its marble temple of Artemis, and the tallest buildings of the lower town, their white-washed stucco walls and red tile roofs glistening in the late afternoon sun. Within a quarter of an hour we passed the first of the tombs making up the necropolis, that depressing introduction to every Greek and Roman town. Workmen were putting the finishing touches on a new tomb.

"It's a lovely city," I observed. "What do you know about it?" Tacitus has an encyclopedic memory, not unlike my uncle.

"It was built by Alexander the Great," he said. "Actually, rebuilt would be more accurate. The original city sat on the north side of the long bay which is now unfolding before us. That site was destroyed by the Lydians some six hundred years ago. A couple of centuries later Alexander re-established Smyrna on the south side of the bay, right at its head. This range of mountains sits behind it, running east to west and anchored by Mt. Mastusia. The genius of Alexander's relocation of the city is that it now blocks the passage of any military force. Anyone travelling north or south along this coast must go through Smyrna or over the mountains. The town itself is laid out on a grid pattern, like a Roman army camp."

I leaned out of the wagon for a better view. "I often wish we could level Rome and start over again on such a logical basis. It's ironic that our capital is a hopeless jumble of winding streets \_\_\_ like the channels that termites eat in a piece of wood \_\_\_ when so many of our provincial cities are so beautifully and symmetrically arranged."

"Of course," Tacitus reminded me, "most of `our' provincial cities \_\_\_ at least in the East \_\_\_ were built by Alexander or his successors. Perhaps if he had rebuilt Rome . . . but he would have had to conquer it first. And we certainly couldn't have that."

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We found a decent inn on the south side of town, one which boasted a large stable and the luxury of individual rooms, not just sleeping space in a large common room. The two men whom I took to be Jews said they would be staying with someone in the city and asked the innkeeper for directions to the house of Apelles.

"Are you friends of his?" the innkeeper asked.

"We have mutual friends," the older of the two replied. "We bear letters of introduction."

"I'm sorry to inform you," the innkeeper said, "that the noble Apelles died yesterday. He was much loved in Smyrna. In fact, he was one of our boularchs for this month."

"Oh, my," the younger man said. "Under that circumstance we can hardly impose on the family for lodging. Is there room for us here?"

The innkeeper nodded. "By all means, if you don't mind sharing a room."

"That's all right," the younger man said.

The older man smiled. "Yes. It's certainly better than hearing that there's no room in the inn."

The younger man glared at him as though he were betraying some private joke.

The inn's rooms proved small but tolerable for overnight lodging. The walls were whitewashed, though devoid of decoration. The straw ticking in the mattresses was clean, and so were the chamberpots — both good signs. The innkeeper, a short, stout ruddy-cheeked man with a fringe of red and gray hair around his bald head, seemed a decent sort. He was named Androcles, which means 'noble man' in Greek. And he had a young wife and young children.

Having settled us in our rooms, Androcles directed us to the nearest bath house, just a block away.

"Do men and women still bathe separately here?" Tacitus asked.

"Yes," Androcles replied. "I've heard that in Rome the emperor has introduced the innovation of both sexes bathing together." He grinned in anticipation.

"That's becoming the common practice," Tacitus said. "And it's being copied in larger cities around the empire."

"Smyrna isn't one of them," Androcles said, "for good or ill."

I was glad to hear that. It's not that I don't appreciate the sight of women's nude bodies. My problem is that I appreciate the sight too much and can't always control the outward manifestation of my enjoyment. Strutting around in that state in the baths — raising a tent under one's towel, as they say — makes a man the object of Priapus jokes and other low forms of humor.

Tacitus and I posted a couple of our slaves to guard our belongings at the inn. Taking two others with us, we stopped to buy some perfumed oil on our way to the bath house.

"Are you sure you've got your strigil?" Tacitus asked me mockingly as we left the shop and resumed our walk.

"Please stop teasing me about that."

"Well, I don't see why you can't just use the scrapers in the public baths. Everybody else does."

"That's precisely the point. Everybody else does. And they don't just bathe with them. People scratch themselves everywhere with them as well as scraping off the oil. I'll bring my own with me, thank you."

This bath house rated among the nicer ones we had seen on this trip. The wall mosaics, depicting sea creatures and

nymphs, were standard fare but well done. The floor mosaics, mostly geometric patterns, were fresh and unchipped. We left my slave in the dressing room to watch our clothes. Tacitus' slave accompanied us into the bath itself. The man gives massages that beggar description. After a long day of bouncing around in a wagon, he is worth every sestertius that Tacitus paid for him. The fact that he's deaf adds to his value, for it means he can't overhear our conversations. His previous owner punctured his ears for that very reason.

Because of our late arrival in town the bath was almost deserted when we got there. Only two men were soaking in the pool by the time we reached that stage. One was a bald fellow with a snowy white fringe of hair and a matching beard. The other was much younger and had classical Greek features, large eyes and pouty lips. Did they speak Latin? Although Latin is the official language of the empire, it is rarely spoken east of the Adriatic Sea. Educated Greeks do sometimes learn Latin. All educated Romans know Greek. We regard it not as a foreign language, but as our other language.

Tacitus and I didn't dare talk about anything meaningful, in whatever language. We couldn't guess what use these strangers might make of any overheard conversations. Every city in the empire has its own Regulus, some bloated maggot waiting to fatten himself even more on the carcass of another betrayal. We confined ourselves to small talk.

"It's remarkable," I said, "how a year's post in a province takes up a good portion of two years. You have to get your affairs in order before leaving, then travel for at least a month to get there by the assigned date. You can't leave until your term ends, and it's another month and more of travel to get home. Then it takes several months to unscramble the mess your affairs have fallen into."

"But you do get to see a large piece of the empire," Tacitus pointed out. "We'll be passing near the site of Troy in a few days. Just think, Homer, Achilles, doomed Hector!"

"That just means we'll be approaching the Hellespont," I said with a shudder. "And to cross that I have to get on another boat. `Doomed' is the right word."

The younger bather spoke up from across the pool. "Perhaps you could lash some ships together and construct a bridge, the way Xerxes did when he invaded Greece. He even put trees and dirt on it to fool the horses, as I recall."

So the fellow did speak Latin. Before I could form a witty enough response, Marcellus and Cornutus strolled into the bath, each accompanied by several slaves. Both men exuded an aura of largeness that made me feel even smaller and slighter than I am. Cornutus, the older by a decade, was the more muscular. His chest reminded me of a wall. His light brown hair and green eyes suggested Gallic ancestry. Marcellus personified the best and worst of Rome. He bore the classic Roman features, with dark hair and eyes and an aquiline nose. But his waist was already acquiring a ring of flab, indicative of his sycophantic lifestyle, just as Rome was growing flabby, feeding off its provinces.

"Well, fellow-travellers and now fellow bathers," Marcellus said with too much joviality as he eased himself into the water. Cornutus sat on the edge of the pool and dangled his legs in the water before lowering himself into it with a weary sigh. The bald fellow and his younger friend nodded in greeting but said nothing. I wanted to warn Marcellus and Cornutus that the strangers could speak Latin, but I couldn't think of any way to do it without being obvious.

No one mentioned the incident during our lunch stop. I wondered if Cornutus had already `dealt with' the girl.

"Let's have some wine," Marcellus said. He sounded like one of those people who try to conceal their over-fondness for drink by forcing everyone else to drink with them. He sent one of his servants to the front of the bath house to purchase some wine from an attendant. The man returned, followed in short order by a servant girl carrying six goblets on a tray. She handed one to Cornutus, one to Marcellus, and then offered the tray to us to select one. Marcellus motioned for her to take the last two cups to the Greek men on the other side of the pool.

"The dust of travel is difficult to wash away," Cornutus said, accepting the cup which the slave offered him. "What puts you on the road?" he asked Marcellus.

"I'm checking into some investments on behalf of my friend, Marcus Aquilius Regulus. If things are handled properly, Regulus stands to make a great deal of money."

"And your commission won't exactly be small," Tacitus said drily.

"Is it unjust to be paid for doing a valuable service?" Marcellus replied. "Especially in a delicate matter where timing is so essential." He looked to Cornutus for support, which he received in the form of a raised wine goblet.

"And you're returning to Rome after service in Syria?" Marcellus asked Cornutus.

"I was due to serve another year," Cornutus said in a robust voice that would have had a kind of reverberation to it even without the effect of the high ceiling in the bath, "but I've been informed that my father's health is failing."

"I hope we find him alive and well upon our return," I said, meaning it sincerely as one who had already lost two fathers. Tacitus added a hearty second to my toast.

"May the gods grant it," Marcellus said solemnly, pouring out a bit of his wine as an offering. The rest of us followed his lead.

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By the time we returned to the inn, Androcles and his wife were serving dinner to our party, other guests, and a crowd of locals. They had the assistance of a buxom servant girl who immediately attracted Tacitus' attention. The tables and benches had been placed closer together than when I had seen the room earlier in the afternoon, in order to clear a space in the center for some forthcoming entertainment.

I suppose I groaned too loudly when a plate of some heavy, greasy meat was set in front of us, the sort of thing one usually gets in public establishments, smothered with sauces to disguise how long it had taken to get from the market to the table.

"Too much for your delicate palate?" Tacitus asked with a trace of mockery.

"I find this sort of thing indigestible," I said, pushing the plate away from me and reaching for some bread. "I guess my uncle spoiled me in that regard. Meals in his house were lighter, fresher. And I hate to eat sitting on a bench. Why can't we find room to recline? It's so much more healthful."

"Why can't you just relax and stop being such a prig? We have convivial company. We don't have to sleep in our wagon tonight. And it looks like we're going to have some entertainment."

"Oh, that will be the perfect culmination to the day," I said. I detest the noisy entertainments that so often accompany Roman (and Greek) dinners. My uncle spoiled me in that regard, too, I guess. Or perhaps he just encouraged a natural inclination. Dinner in his house was always a calm affair, almost Socratic, with a trained slave reading a book, followed by conversation on the topic of the reading. If music was played, it was always of the most soothing kind, an aid to digestion.

The servant girl slapped a pitcher of cheap wine on the table. Tacitus grabbed her hand and kissed it before she could get away. She gave him a broad smile and a wink. Two musicians settled themselves in a corner and struck up a seductive tune on a flute and a tambourine. I braced myself for some sort of lascivious dance. I did not expect the innkeeper's twelve-year-old daughter to perform it. As the throbbing of the music grew more insistent she threw her head back and waggled her skinny hips suggestively. Her gauzy costume made no secret of her budding womanhood. Androcles watched with a gleam on his pasty face, circulating through the crowd and nudging one man, then winking at another. It sickened me to realize that this `noble man' was auctioning his child off for the night. I couldn't stand to watch any longer, so I grabbed some bread and cheese and a cup of wine and went upstairs to my room.

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I was awakened the next morning just after daybreak by a loud wailing noise outside my door. I hadn't heard anything so terrifying since I survived the eruption of Vesuvius. In my first moment of waking I thought I was back there, with people running around in panic, screaming uncontrollably. Rushing out of my room, I found Androcles, wringing his hands in despair and moving his feet as though willing them to run but unable to make them obey.

"What's the matter?" I asked, grabbing his arm.

"He's dead!" the innkeeper gasped and pointed to the open door of Cornutus' room, directly across from mine. "Lucius Cornutus is dead!"

"Dead? By the gods! What are you saying?"

"His heart!" He clutched his hands to his own heart.

I couldn't believe this fellow had the medical knowledge to recognize that Cornutus had some problem with his heart. I grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "What about his heart?"

After several false starts he managed to sputter, "He doesn't . . . have one any more."