

Germanicus – Chapter 1

So there I was, joy of joys unlooked for, back at the palace for another private talk with the empress. Hermes, the messenger-ape who led me through the maze of corridors to her office, hadn't changed in the eighteen months since I'd seen him last; not even his underwear, judging by the mouldy cheese smell that drifted back and up my nostrils. I didn't make any smartass comments, mind; there're some things even I won't risk, and sassing palace slaves is one of them. Besides, you don't cross gorillas. Not when they can lead you up dark dead-ends where they can work their evil will in peace and shove your head where you won't find it until the next census.

The secretary in the lemon tunic behind the desk hadn't changed either. He gave me a look like I'd stepped in dog puke somewhere along the way and the fact was still painfully obvious, then carried on tidying his already immaculate nails with a slip of pumice, waiting for an introduction.

The gorilla spoke. 'Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus, to see Her Excellency the Empress.'

Amazing what you can teach these things, with patience and a bit of fruit. The secretary never batted an elegant eyelash. He consulted his appointments list and made a firm tick.

'You're late, Corvinus,' he said.

'Yeah, well, I...'

'Never mind. We're here now, and that's all that matters, isn't it?' He stood up with a flash of insincere teeth and a whiff of hair oil. 'Her Excellency will see you immediately. That's all, Hermes.'

The ape nodded and loped off without a backward glance. Feeding time at the canteen, no doubt.

'This way, sir.' The secretary knocked gently on the double doors, pushed them open and stepped aside.

I recognised the smell at once. Camphor. It brought me out in a sweat. After the last time I'd been in this room I'd sworn never to let Bathyllus buy another mothball again. Old age, old crimes. Livia.

She was sitting behind her desk, as if she'd never moved. The same lifeless cosmetic mask, the same dead eyes. I wiped my sweaty hands on my mantle.

'Come in, Corvinus,' she said. 'How nice to see you again. Do have a seat.'

I pulled up the ancient Egyptian chair. That was familiar, too.

'Your Excellency.'

Her dead eyes focused behind my left shoulder. 'Make absolutely sure that we're not disturbed,' she said.

'Yes, Excellency,' the secretary murmured. I heard the doors close with a solid thunk and tried not to think of tombs. Shit. She might at least have told the guy to bring us some wine. I could've murdered a cup of Setinian.

The eyes swung back to me.

'And how is the lovely Rufia Perilla?' The mask cracked and I realised that Livia was smiling. Or trying to. 'Well, I hope?'

'Uh, she's okay, Excellency.'

'No problems with the divorce or the wedding?'

'No.' My palms were sweating again. I wiped them surreptitiously.

'That's good. I'm glad I was able to help there. Her ex-husband Suillius Rufus really was quite unsuitable. He's still serving in Syria, as I understand?'

'Yeah. He commands the Third Gallic.' I crossed my legs, leaned back and tried to look calm. The chair creaked dangerously...