

It'd been three years since I'd last visited the Greens' stables. Nothing had changed. The place still looked like a fortress: high, smooth-faced wall topped with pottery shards set in cement, a gate that would've stopped a charging elephant, and just in case visiting punters still hadn't got the message a door-slave outside with biceps and pectorals that your common-or-garden gorilla would die for.

The scowl wasn't exactly welcoming, either. I should've brought a bunch of bananas with me as a peace-offering, but it was too late now. I stepped up to the guy and gave him my best smile.

'Hi,' I said. 'Remember me, pal?'

The slave stood up, his little piggy eyes under their mat of tangled hair narrowing as he gave me the once-over. It was like watching a titan off a pediment getting ready for round two of a theomachy. He nodded slowly and spat to one side. I swear the gobbet of phlegm sizzled on the cobbles, and in October that has nothing to do with temperature.

'I don't forget faces, Corvinus,' he said. 'What the fuck do you want?'

Yeah, well. It's nice to be popular. I reached into my tunic and brought out Minicius Natalis's letter.

'I'm here to see the boss,' I said, handing it over. 'Personal invite.'

'That so, now?' He squinted at the seal: pictures he could cope with. Just. 'What about?'

Yeah, I'd been wondering that myself, because the letter didn't say; just that it was important and that Natalis would appreciate a visit as soon as I could manage. 'You have me there, friend.

Uh...maybe you could sort of take me to him and I could ask? Would that be possible, do you think, or should we give ourselves three guesses?'

That got me a long hard stare. Par for the course: sarcasm's wasted on a racing-faction door-guard. You may as well shoot dried peas at a rhino.

Finally, he spat again, reached up and unbarred the gate.

'Wait here,' he growled.

The bar on the other side clunked into place behind him, leaving me to kick my heels while he consulted higher authority. Not that I was surprised. If Jupiter himself were to come down in all his glory with his eagle on his wrist he still wouldn't get past the front gate unless he was spoken for, and they'd probably frisk the eagle, too. The racing game's a serious business, and faction bosses don't take chances.

Ten minutes later, the troll reappeared.

'Okay, Corvinus,' he said. 'You're cleared. Follow me.'

Inside was a different world. The Greens are Rome's top team, patronised by Gaius Caesar himself - crown prince, soon-to-be emperor (if the news from Capri was anything to go by) and all-round dangerous nut - and so equipped with the best of everything money can buy, plus a few things it can't. There was no sign of the horses, of course - paranoia dictates that these beauties are kept well away from the curious eyes of even legit visitors - but everything else screamed cash and quality, right down to the natty tunics worn by the stable skivvies. Not that it was all surface show, mind: you can't be inside a faction stable for long before you catch the sense of obsession. For these guys, anyone from the top man right the way down, the faction comes first, middle and last. And as far as esprit de corps goes, if you're looking for the top variety you can forget the legions; they don't even come close.

The admin building was out on its own, set in a snazzy formal garden. It could've doubled for a private house on the Esquiline or the Caelian, even – at a pinch, and barring size – for one on the Palatine itself: PR again, because the faction-master of the Greens is a man with serious clout, and if you have clout in Rome then you're expected to flaunt it. My guide-troll nodded to the door-slave sweeping the porch, crossed the marble-pillared and mosaic-floored entrance hall and knocked on a cedar-panelled door at the opposite end.

'Come in.'

We did. I'd been inside the inner sanctum before, so I wasn't surprised. Forget the snazzy town-house, at least where the interior fittings were concerned: this was a working office, with the back wall lined with cubby-holes for documents, chairs instead of couches and a big desk rear of centre. The furniture was top quality, and the mosaics and murals must've cost an arm and a leg. 'Quality', though, wasn't a word you could apply to the guy sitting behind the desk. Titus Minicius Natalis, the faction-master of the Greens, was a fat, balding, pint-sized runt with a stubbly chin and 'ex-slave' written all over him in block capitals. He wasn't thick, mark you, far from it: you didn't get all the way up from nothing to being the head of Rome's top Colour without brains. Not without a streak of ruthlessness a yard wide, either. I didn't know if Natalis actually had a white-haired old grandmother squirrelled away somewhere, but if he did I'd bet the old biddy had to check herself regularly for price tags.

'Nice to see you again, Corvinus,' he said. Yeah, well, I couldn't exactly say it was reciprocal, but there you go, you can't have everything. And he was only being polite. 'Sit down, please. That's all, Socrates.'

The troll grunted and exited, closing the door behind him. I pulled up a chair and sat. We stared at each other for a long moment. Then he leaned back, almost disappearing behind the model chariot and horses on his desk.

'So,' he said. 'You got my letter.'

'Sure.' I folded my arms. 'For what it was worth.' We'd never liked one another from the first, and I didn't see any reason not to carry on playing it that way. Still, the bare request to talk to me about something important had had me hooked, and knowing the bastard knew it would do just that irked me. 'What's this about, Natalis? Some more grubby faction business?'

'No,' he said. 'No, it's nothing to do with the faction. Or even with racing.'

'All right.' I leaned back myself, unfolded my arms and crossed my legs while he fiddled with a pen and set it down. The guy was nervous. Odd. 'So what, then?'

'A favour.' He hesitated. 'There's a jug of wine on that table over there. Massic, and good stuff. Pour us both a cup, okay?'

Well, he had his priorities right, anyway, and it'd been a long dry hike from the Caelian. I got up, walked over to the tray and poured. The jug and cups were solid silver, chased with – surprise! – a frieze of running horses. I set a full cup on the desk beside him, sipped at my own, and sat down again.

'I don't think, pal,' I said carefully, 'that I owe you any favours at all. The reverse if anything. Correct me if I'm wrong.'

'You impressed me, Corvinus.' He took a long swallow from his cup and set it down. 'I don't impress easy, and when it happens I don't forget. Oh, sure, I admit it: if there is a debt then it goes the other way, and you got up my nose then just as much as I got up yours, so I can't even claim the benefit of past acquaintance. Truth to tell, you still do.' Well, that was frank, at least. He'd never been one to mince his words, Titus Natalis. 'Even so, you're a digger with a brain in your head, which is what I need at present, and that's not common.'

‘Never mind the smarm, friend,’ I said. ‘Just tell me what you want, okay? Then I can turn you down flat and we can both get on with our lives.’

Instead of answering, he opened a drawer in the desk, took out a sheet of paper and slid it towards me. I reached over, picked it up and glanced at it.

It was a money order made out in my name. For five thousand sesterces.

I stared at it, then at him.

‘That’s just for listening,’ he said. He picked up his cup and took another mouthful of the wine. He was looking less nervous now. Maybe it was the wine, but it was probably the money. Guys like Natalis really believe in the power of the check. ‘Fifteen minutes of your time. You want to tell me to get lost at the end of it, that’s your privilege. Completely. No reasons from you, no argument from me. Give that to my banker and he’ll cash it anyway without a murmur. But if we do end up with a deal, and you deliver the goods – as I’m pretty sure you will – I’ll make it up to the round fifty.’

Sweet gods! Fifty thousand sesterces was a small fortune. Me, I don’t do gobsmacked, not all that often, anyway, but I must’ve gaped. Natalis was watching me closely, half-smiling. If you could call an expression that made the guy look like he’d just bitten on a lemon a half-smile.

‘Well, Corvinus?’ he said. ‘What about it? Do I have that fifteen minutes or not?’

I remembered to close my mouth before I answered: we had a certain degree of good old purple-striper gravitas to maintain here, and I was bugged if I was going to let him see he’d rocked me. ‘You’ve got the ball, friend,’ I said. ‘Go ahead.’

‘Fine.’ He set the cup down. All business now, and not a trace of nervousness. ‘I want you to look into a suicide. A young lad by the name of Sextus Papinius.’

Well, that name rang a bell, at least. And I’d got my mental faculties, such as they were, back into gear. ‘Any relation to Papinius Allenius the consular?’ I said.

There was the barest hesitation. ‘His son. But it’s the mother’s side of the family I have connections with. If you’re wondering, which I suspect you are.’

Yeah. I was, at that. Natalis had started off by saying this had nothing to do with faction business, which meant it had to be private. No one shells out fifty thousand silver pieces unless they have a serious – and personal – vested interest in the matter somewhere along the line. If the lad had been a relative of his I could’ve understood, but the son of an ex-consul put that right out of court: consular families and those of ex-slaves, even stinking-rich ones like Natalis, don’t mix socially, let alone intermarry; not nohow, not never, even in this lax day and age. The obvious alternative explanation I didn’t even consider: unless my judgment was way off beam Natalis just wasn’t the type to have boyfriends. And that didn’t leave much for guesswork.

‘The mother’s side?’ I said.

‘Her name’s Rupilia. She’s from Leontini.’ Natalis took another sip of his wine. ‘Same as me. Her father was Rupilius Hasta, and old Hasta was my first real patron. You getting there?’

Yeah, I was, and it fitted, at least the Sicilian bit did. Something I did know about Natalis from former acquaintance was that he’d started out as a humble driver in Sicily before coming to Rome as third-stringer for the Greens. After which he’d worked – or clawed – his way up the ladder, all the way to the top. And if this Rupilia was the daughter of his first patron then –

‘The family was the oldest in the region. Big in horse breeding and racing, always had been.

Hasta took an interest in me – I was never his slave, but he liked to help promising drivers – and when I had the chance to move to Rome he lent me the cash.’ Natalis got up and moved over to the wine jug. ‘Without that money I’d still be in Sicily, probably on the scrapheap by now. And like I told you, Corvinus, I don’t forget easy.’

Uh-huh. Check. That's the way Sicilian minds work: you have a debt, either way, then you pay it, QED, end of story. Things were beginning to clear. 'So,' I said, 'when the daughter came to Rome and married Allenius you renewed the link?'

'I'd never broken it. And I kept it up with young Sextus, gladly. The boy was the spit of his grandfather and he'd racing in his bones.' Natalis held up the jug. 'You want a refill?'

'Sure.' I took a long swig and held the cup out for more.

'I don't mean he was a gambler, mind.' He poured carefully. 'Oh, the lad liked to gamble, like any youngster, but he never went overboard, he'd more sense. What he was really interested in was the other side, my side, the cars and the driving. Although interested's not strong enough, not by half: he loved the whole business, loved it as much as I do. He'd've made a driver himself, if things'd been just a bit different. He had the guts for it, certainly, and the heart, easy; he'd guts and heart in spades, Sextus Papinius. But he never had the skill, and knew he never would. Even so, he spent a lot of his free time here, right from when he was knee-high, especially after I became faction-master.'

'So,' I said. 'What happened, exactly?'

'I told you. Two days back he killed himself.' Natalis sank a neat quarter pint of the Massic at a gulp.

'Killed himself how? Slit wrists? Poison?'

'Neither. He jumped from the top floor of an Aventine tenement.' I must've looked as surprised as I felt, because he shrugged. 'Yeah. The flat was empty at the time, and the tenement was on his visiting list. So that's what he used.'

""Visiting list""?

'He was a junior investigation officer. With the claims department of the emperor's new fire commission.'

Right; that made sense. Of a kind, anyway. A couple of months back there had been a major fire in the Aventine and Racetrack districts. The Wart had appointed a commission headed by his four sons-in-law to assess the damage and arrange compensation and rebuilding. I didn't know yet how old exactly this Sextus Papinius had been, but for a kid from a consular family, age say eighteen or nineteen, which would fit the spirit of things, junior investigation officer would be a logical first rung on the political ladder.

'Why did he do it?' I said.

Natalis gave me a long look. 'That's the point,' he said finally. 'I've no idea. None at all. That's what I'd be paying you to find out.'

'Is the reason so important?'

He shrugged again. 'It is to me. I thought a lot of the kid. And I don't like not knowing. If you can understand that.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Yeah, I can understand that.' I could even sympathise: in his place I'd've wanted to know too, just for my own peace of mind. And I had to admit that he had me hooked. 'Okay. You have your fifteen minutes.'

'Fine.' He leaned back. 'The floor's yours. You got any questions, you ask them and I'll answer if I can.'

'Let's start with the boy himself. He the suicidal type at all? Moody? Get depressed? That sort of thing?'

Natalis shook his head. 'Not so's you'd notice, or not all that often. Certainly no more than any other kid his age.'

'Which was what?'

‘Nineteen. He’d just had his nineteenth birthday.’

‘What about his character? A loner? Run about with any of the fast crowds?’

‘He had his fun. Girls and wine, a bit of wildness here and there, but nothing serious. You know the sort of thing.’

I nodded; yeah, I knew, I’d’ve been surprised if it’d been otherwise, given the family background. Par for the course. So: your typical rich young lad-about-town, feeling his oats and kicking up his heels before life grabbed him by the balls and turned him into a pillar of society. Only in Sextus Papinius’s case it never would, now. ‘He get on well with his parents?’

‘Parent, singular. Rupilia and Allenius are divorced, have been for years, and Sextus lived with his mother. There’s no contact, none, at least as far as I’m aware. I doubt if I’ve heard the boy mention his father more than two or three times in all the time I’ve known him. You’ll want to talk to Rupilia, no doubt; the house is near the Octavian Porch, one of the old properties on the Marcellus Theatre side. They got along okay in general, as far as I know, although Rupilia’ – he hesitated – ‘well, bringing up a teenager without a man in the house isn’t easy, and Rupilia’s not the strong-willed disciplinarian type. You understand me?’

Sure I did. Reading between the lines, I’d guess the kid had been spoiled rotten and grown up a handful. Still, that was nothing unusual in the top bracket, especially these days when single-parent families or parents with their own social lives to think of were the rule rather than the exception. ‘So where does the money come from?’ I said. Money there would have to be: spoilt brat, lad-about-town pursuits didn’t come cheap.

‘Hasta was well off. He settled part of the estate in Leontini on her before he died, plus the income from some property in Capua. Also, of course, when the divorce went through she got part of her dowry back. She’s not rich, but she’s comfortable enough.’

‘And she never thought of remarrying?’

No.’

Just the bare negative, and Natalis had closed up tighter than a constipated clam. Uh-huh. Well, there could be lots of reasons behind that, and probably none of them were relevant, or my business. I took a swig of the Massic. ‘Okay. This tenement. Where was it, exactly?’

‘On the river-side slope of the Aventine, near the start of Old Ostia Road. One of the newer blocks. The manager lives on site, which was why Sextus was there that day. Or presumably it was. That’s something else I don’t know for sure.’

‘Name? The manager’s, I mean?’

‘Caepio. Lucceius Caepio. He’s - he was - responsible for two or three other properties that got burned down in the fire.’

‘Fine. Last question, pal, for the present at least. Given the kid did actually kill himself, why do you think he did it?’ He opened his mouth to answer and I held up a hand. ‘Yeah, sure, I know, but you must be able to hazard some sort of a guess. Gut feeling, no comeback.’

‘I knew Sextus all his life, Corvinus. And I’ve already told you. He wasn’t the brooding type.’ ‘But?’ There was a but: I could see it in his eyes. I waited. ‘Natalis. Come on. I’d have to start somewhere, okay?’

He frowned. ‘Like I say, he had racing in his bones, maybe one day if things’d turned out different he might’ve sat in this chair. But this last month – he was round here a lot in that time, more than usual, if anything – I’d the feeling he had something other than the cars and horses on his mind.’

‘You’re saying he was worried?’

‘No. Worried’s too strong. Preoccupied, maybe. That the word?’ He shook his head. ‘Hell, I don’t know, not to be sure about, let alone swear to. I could’ve been imagining things, and if I wasn’t it could’ve been for any of a dozen reasons. You know kids. Certainly he didn’t say nothing, which he usually would rather than to his mother if something was biting him. Maybe it was just me; the Plebeian Games’re next month, the Blues’ve been winning lately and the whole place is on edge.’ He cleared his throat and suddenly the hard-nosed businessman was back. ‘So I can’t afford the time to think about it, okay? That’s your job, Corvinus. If you want it.’ Despite everything, I was more than half-ready to say No: after all, Natalis was no friend of mine, I didn’t owe him, and raking through the whys and wherefores of a suicide never does anyone any good. Then I saw the look on his face that maybe he hadn’t wanted me to see, and I knew I couldn’t.

Besides, I’d got that prickly feeling at the back of my neck. And fifty thousand sesterces is serious gravy by anyone’s reckoning.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘I want it.’

‘Fine. Then we have a deal?’ He stood up and held out a hand.

‘Sure,’ I said.

We shook.