

I

Even without the bundle of rods that he carried when he was on active duty, the guy interrupting our breakfast was something: six foot six high by four wide, muscles like boulders and all the facial delicacy of an Alp. Jupiter knows where they find these buggers. They must breed them special and feed them on gravel.

Marcus Valerius Caecinus?’ he growled.

Bathyllus was doing his scandalised Greek chorus act in the doorway, and I could feel the waves of disapproval all the way across the room. Bathyllus’s waves would’ve reduced any ordinary mortal to a cringing, apologetic wreck, but then Axemen aren’t your ordinary mortals. These bastards have skins like rhinos. Tempers, too.

‘I told him he had the name wrong, sir,’ he said, ‘but he wouldn’t listen.’

‘That’s okay, Bathyllus.’ I’d set down my roll and honey. ‘No harm done. Go and count the statues, sunshine.’ He left, fizzing. I looked back at the Axeman. Shit, this didn’t look good. Axemen worked as gophers for the top brass, and they were bad news; especially these days with Macro running things as Praetorian commander. Less than a month in Rome and I was in trouble already. Worse, I’d no idea why. ‘You made two out of three, friend. The name’s Corvinus.’

That got me a scowl and ten flexed fingers.

‘The mistress told me Caecinus.’

Yeah, well, I’d give him full marks for persistence. Speed of uptake was something else, but then smart isn’t an adjective that figures very highly in the job description. With these muscle-bound hulks the thought process is so straight and narrow you could use it for an aqueduct. You don’t contradict them, either. I shrugged. ‘Fine. We won’t argue. Uh... “mistress”?’

‘The Lady Junia Torquata. She said find Marcus Valerius Caecinus, Rufia Perilla’s husband, just moved in to the old Apronius place on the Caelian. This is the place so you must be him, right?’

There ain’t no arguing with logic like that. I glanced at Perilla, lying on the other couch. Her eyes were wide and there was a crust of bread she seemed to have forgotten about poised halfway to her mouth. Well, that explained the confusion, anyway. I’d met Junia Torquata a couple of years back, when we’d had her round to dinner and she’d put a hole in my wine cellar you could drive a marble-cart through and still managed to walk out the door straight as a legion’s First Spear. She hadn’t been able to hold my name in her head then, either. I grinned and relaxed; if the guy was Torquata’s then unsociable hour or not maybe I wasn’t going to be hauled off to the Mamertine after all.

‘Right,’ I said. ‘So what can I do for the chief Vestal, pal?’

The Axeman was flexing his hands like he was squeezing a couple of those wooden balls wrestlers use to strengthen their grip. ‘I’m to take you to the Galba place,’ he said.

‘Is that so, now? And why would you do that?’

‘Because there’s been a death.’

I stared at him. Jupiter, not again! Five minutes back in residence at the Hub of the World and we were already hitting corpses. At breakfast-time, too. Maybe I was the thanaturgic equivalent of one of these screwy stones from Magnesia that snatch iron pins from your hands.

‘Yeah?’ I said. ‘What kind of death?’

The guy hesitated and the squeezing went up a notch. Axemen aren't particularly known for showing their feelings, but if he'd been human I'd've said he was nervous. And where an Axeman's concerned that takes a hell of a lot of doing.

'Just a death,' he said.

This was getting silly. 'Fine,' I said. 'You care to tell me whose, at least? Or is that a secret too?'

His eyes rolled: personal initiative is another quality that isn't a prime requirement for Axemen, and we were obviously working right on the edge here.

'One of the Ladies.'

Shit. I sat back and heard Perilla draw in her breath. One of the Ladies, eh? For Torquata's Axeman that could mean only one thing.

The dead woman was a Vestal.

He'd brought a litter. Usually I've no time for litters, but an hour after dawn on a raw December morning with the rain gusting in from the north it beat walking hands down, especially where a trip across town to the Sacred Way was involved. Besides, I needed space to think

Bubbling George hadn't been exactly forthcoming: ask as I might while Bathyllus had helped me into my formal mantle and thick cloak, the guy had zipped up tighter than a constipated clam. Still, certain things were clear enough. First off, we were moving in exalted circles here. Sulpicius Galba was the current senior consul, at the tail end of his year of office. I'd never met him, and from what I'd heard that was no loss because he was a first-rate, twenty-four-carat bastard; an arch-snob, tight-fisted as an Aventine landlord and with a sadistic streak you'd need a yardstick to measure. He was also (which went a long way to explaining how the guy had made consul) a close crony of Prince Gaius, currently strutting his stuff with the Wart on Capri, and – if you believed wineshop rumour, which I always do – queer as a five-legged cat.

His wife, on the other hand, I didn't know at all, not even her name; and if I didn't miss my guess it was his wife who'd be relevant here because that was where the Vestals came in. Early December is when the nocturnal rite of the Good Goddess is held at the senior consul's house, with the guy's wife playing hostess, and last night had been the night. The ceremony involves only women, and only those at the top of the social tree. Galba, along with every other male and male animal in the house, would've been thrown out on his ear while his wife, the Vestals and a pretty large slice of Rome's female beautiful and good did whatever the hell they do that evening after dark and then partied until dawn with not a man in the place.

Only this year, obviously, they hadn't. Something had gone wrong, and in the morning when the barriers came up Junia Torquata had sent Bubbling George to look for me.

That last bit was what really bugged. 'A death', Bubbling George had said, and he'd said it very carefully, which implied that it was the word Torquata had told him to use. A death, not a murder. Murder I could've understood as the reason for hauling me away from my porridge, but there again Vestals don't get murdered: they're about as sacred as you can get in Rome, and you don't mess with them, nohow, no way, never. Oh, sure, when they go out – and Vestals are as free to come and go as anyone – they have complimentary Axemen bodyguards, but that's only because of who they are, not for protection. A Vestal could walk through the Subura

end to end alone with a purse stuffed with gold pieces any time of the day or night, and not a mugger would touch a single hair of her six-tressed head. He wouldn't dare. Just the thought of murdering a Vestal made my scalp crawl.

Also, Torquata wasn't the sort of person to call a spade a digging implement. If she said a death, then that was what she'd meant.

It just didn't make sense.

The other question, of course, was why me?

I settled back against the cushions. I had the feeling I wasn't going to enjoy this at all.