

THE GOLDEN DICE

EXCERPT

ONE - CAECILIA

Veii, Winter, 399 BC

He smelled of leather, horse and beeswax polish, the bronze of his armor cold against her despite her heavy woolen cloak. When he kissed her though, hard and hungrily, his mouth and tongue were warm despite chill lips and cheeks.

“You need to take this off,” she said, as she always did, pressing against the cuirass, needing the feel of his body.

“Don’t worry, I plan to,” he replied, as he always did, then laughed and kissed her.

She could not move away from him, arms tightening around his waist, not trusting that he had returned, that another year had passed and he had not been killed.

For there were only two seasons now: war and winter.

Before this, it had been summer that made Caecilia smile with its lazy heat and languid evenings. But after seven years of conflict, she welcomed the hint of ice in the north wind and the bare stripped branches of trees ready to bear the burden of snow. Short days and long darkness no longer seemed oppressive because, in winter, her husband would come home.

Another long clear note of the war trumpets sounded. Still holding Mastarna close, Caecilia turned her head to scan the tumult around her, glad the horns did not herald a charge but instead a return, as line after line of soldiers entered through the massive double gates of the Etruscan city of Veii.

The vast town square and wide avenues seethed with the color of the massed crowd, and timber-and-terracotta-clad houses and temples were gaudy with garlands and ribbons. As the army marched into the forum a surge of people breached its formation, military discipline forgotten as wives and children hastened to kiss husbands and fathers while mothers and older men embraced sons.

Amid the throng, fine, long-legged warhorses shifted and whinnied as they were held fast, steam rising from their hides in the coldness of the afternoon, hot breath snorting from their nostrils. Adding to the clamor were laughter and merry tunes from double pipe, castanet and timbrel, interrupted by snatches of sobbing, the lament of women whose men had not returned: a tragic counterpoint to celebration.

Caecilia could not ignore their sorrow. Even in her happiness a tight knot of apprehension remained, the voice that told her this reunion was due to respite in conflict, not its resolution. She chided herself not to sour the sweetness of Mastarna's return with the anticipation of his inevitable departure.

There was a rhythm to the fighting.

When the war season began with the lengthening of days and the greening of fields, the Veientanes would ride out to meet the Romans, who were assaulting Veii with a dogged vengeance. A vengeance sought in the name of Aemilia Caeciliana. A vengeance sought against her.

For seven years Caecilia had watched the Romans, who were once her people, hew pickets and planks and stakes from Veientane woodland to build stockades and siege engines to surround her adopted city, hindering trade, blocking supplies and raiding farmlands until, by bright autumn and the falling of leaves, Veii's patience would falter as it waited for winter and the enemy to retreat. Each city pausing. Licking its wounds. For Roman bellies need to be fed, too. Roman crops need to be sown: barley and pulses and wheat. Roman families need to embrace their men, and Roman generals need to be elected.

Mastarna's cheek, heavy with bristle, brushed against hers, his own apprehension hinted in his deep, low voice, a voice whose timbre always stirred her. "And the baby?"

Smiling, she broke from him and searched for two women who stood jostled by those celebrating around them. Both were grinning as they observed husband and wife. The stout, wiry-haired maid called Cytheris gripped one hand each of two small boys while the nursemaid, Aricia, stepped forward on command and handed a swaddled bundle to her mistress.

"Another son," Caecilia said proudly.

Mastarna took the babe with the confidence of a man practiced in such a task. Even so, the mother wondered at the sight of a warrior cradling soft tininess against the hard contours of his cuirass.

Exchanging his nurse's warmth for the cold comfort of his father's armor didn't please the child. His protests were loud and strident. Unperturbed, Mastarna chuckled, planting a kiss upon the baby's head as he hugged Caecilia once again.

"Thank you. I could have no better wife."

"Nor I a better husband." She reclaimed the bawling baby who settled immediately at her touch.

"Now where are those other sons of mine?" Mastarna turned to face his older children. Wide-eyed and wary of the scarred, metal-clad giant who had returned into their lives, the boys were speechless.

Mastarna's thigh-high greaves grated as he crouched down beside them. "Don't tell me you've forgotten me?"

The older boy was solemn, bowing in greeting. "Of course I know who you are, Apa. Hail, General Vel Mastarna!"

"Hail, my son," said his father with equal seriousness before placing his leather-lined bronze helmet upon the boy, engulfing him. The child pulled it back, tilting his head so he could spy the world through the slits between nose and cheek pieces, both hands held firmly on either side to bear the weight.

Seeing his brother gaining such favor, the two-year-old forgot his awe of the warrior. He hastened from behind Cytheris' skirts, bounding over to wrest the trophy from the other. "Give me, Tas, give me!"

The five-year-old turned away, raising the bright blue crested helmet firmly out of reach, not prepared to surrender his prize. "Go away, Larce. Apa gave it to me."

Mastarna laughed and lifted his younger son onto his hip. The boy's startled expression changed to one of glee as he caught sight of the sword strapped to his father's side. "Look, Ati," he shrieked at his mother, gripping the hilt. "Sword! Sword!" Despite struggling to remove the weapon from its sheath it remained secure.

"Hello, Caecilia."

A soldier stood beside her with open arms. It took a moment to recognize the bearded man as Tarchon. Mastarna's other son. Adopted. Little older than she was. The thought was sobering. In spring she would be twenty-six.

There was no sign of the effeminate youth she once knew. He was a man now, boasting battle scars. What warrior did not, after so many years of war? Nevertheless, his fine face was unscathed, its beautiful symmetry incongruous against the blatant masculinity of bronze.

"Thank the gods you have been spared." She hugged him.

Tarchon returned the embrace, cautious of the bundle of boy squeezed between them.

"Thank the gods also that you bore my brother safely." He touched the baby's cheek gently with one finger and was rewarded with a smile. It was no surprise.

Tarchon pleased everyone—everyone except his father.

“He has your big, round Roman eyes, but I won’t hold that against him.”

Caecilia frowned, glancing at the sloe-eyed Etruscans around her. She doubted they’d ever forgive her for being a daughter of Rome. “Yes, but others might.”

Tarchon kissed her cheek. “I’m only teasing. Besides, all here respect you now.”

Before she could reply, Mastarna interrupted. “Isn’t it time I named my new son?” He swung Larce to the ground. The boy immediately grasped his leg, demanding to be returned to the heights. Cytheris quickly drew him away.

Caecilia nodded. Ever since her son was born she’d been anxious to perform the ceremony. After all, the child was two months old and rightly should have been claimed within nine days of his birth. There was always an undercurrent of concern within her. What if Mastarna did not return? Would the right of this boy to take his father’s name be questioned? What would become of her, no longer Roman but never Etruscan, if her husband should die?

“What name have you chosen?”

“Arnth. After Arnth Ulthes, our great friend.”

Mastarna searched her face. “Are you sure?”

“Very sure. It is a strong name, given in honor of a noble man.”

“He would be pleased that you wish to remember him.” He stroked her hair. “Now let me claim him.”

Despite her desire for the rite to be performed, Caecilia hesitated at the thought of placing the child at his father’s feet. The crowd around them was unruly and she was afraid that the horses could trample the baby.

Then she noticed Arruns, Mastarna’s guard—head shaven, the snake tattoo upon his face adding, as always, a rugged menace to him. Without needing an order he cleared a space around the family, holding the reins of his master’s horse tight.

Laying the baby on the cobblestones, Caecilia anxiously watched as Mastarna lifted him above his head.

“All present here bear witness that this boy is my son. His name shall be Arnth of the House of Mastarna. Child of my loins and that of Aemilia Caeciliana’s—known to all as Caecilia.”

Unlike Larce, the infant did not enjoy being raised in the air, screaming with a fierceness at odds with his size. Mastarna hastily lowered him, holding him close, before taking a gold amulet necklace from Caecilia and placing it around the little boy’s neck.

“May this bulla protect you forever from the evil eye. May all the great and almighty gods watch over you!”

Caecilia took the sobbing baby from his father, soothing him once again. As she did so, she noticed that the crowd around them had quieted. She tensed, holding her breath, aware their stares were reserved for her, their silence signaling resentment of her as much as respect for Mastarna.

And she knew why that must be. Seven years ago, in a glade beside a river between two cities, she had made a choice to forsake her home. A choice Rome claimed provoked a war. And she had questioned that decision many times. Not because she did not love her husband but because his people did not love her.

She knew what to do today, though. Had done it before. She slowly held Arnth out to the crowd. "I give my son to this city. Another man-child to bear arms for Veii. Another warrior for you who have become my people."

There was no response at first, their gaze wavering from her to the baby and then to the warrior.

Then cheering erupted. "Hail, Arnth of the House of Mastarna! Hail, General Vel Mastarna!"

Relief filled her, reassured in that moment to know that, even if the Veientanes hated her, she was safe as long as they revered her husband.

EIGHT - PINNA

Rome, Winter, 399 BC

Pinna was a night moth. A tomb whore surviving outside the city wall of Rome. Hiding in the darkness. Drawn to the light but knowing it brought danger. Destined to live a life that was sorrowful and brief.

For her, winter brought a special cruelty. The wind was bitter and the cold seeped from the earth to chill the marrow. Her clothes were sodden: fingers icy and painful from chilblains, lips blue and ringed with sores.

She worked as a hired mourner also. She could not afford to shun the chance to earn money at the funerals of patricians in the daylight or well-off plebeians in the night. She did not care whether it was noble or common ash that landed upon her skin, as long as she could support herself and Fusca, her poor sad mother. Although neither job ever paid enough to quell the hunger pangs for long or allow her to escape to a world where her skin was not tinged gray or her clothes dyed darkly.

Tonight she welcomed the chance to lament the death of a wealthy plebeian. She did not mind caking her hair in ashes or wearing sackcloth when it meant that, for a few hours, she could warm herself beside the flames of a burning bier. Hovering close to the fire, she tried to ignore how it roasted the pale anointed body, the unguents a macabre seasoning to dead flesh. Yet when the flames seized a pocket of fat or worried at sinew she winced at how it popped and sizzled. Covering her nose and mouth could not block the stench or taste of cooking viscera saturating the smoke.

And it was with bitterness that she watched the women of the family douse the embers, knowing that cold would soon creep into her bones again just as heat had cracked and charred the corpse's. Resentful that honey and oil would be used to steep the ashes rather than feed a shivering girl. Aggrieved also that the sacrificial sow would only be consumed amongst the family once the deceased's portion was burned upon the pyre.

Wintertime was always busy for a hired mourner. All those dead soldiers. Dead heroes. Yet, although she might be paid to for a fallen warrior, the men she serviced were not rich enough to ever wield weapons. Poor men, slaves and bondsmen spent their paltry wages to use her. The low life of Rome could not afford to be choosy. The lee of a doorway of a rich man's tomb was cover enough for her to give a hand to a needy man or kneel before him.

After the family of the dead man departed to inter the remains, Pinna steeled herself, knowing she had yet to earn enough that night. Holding aloft a feeble lantern to attract customers, she formed a tiny shrine with pebbles and a stub of candle, leaving a paltry offering to Mater Matuta, the goddess of dawn. She renewed her contract daily with the deity, promising she would revere her if she raised her to a brothel whore so she could enjoy shelter while bearing the weight of men upon her. She did not forget to flatter the Shades of the Dead either as she worked among them, calling them good, as all do.

Hunched against the wall outside the city's sacred boundary, Pinna hoped the oil in her lantern would last the night. At least little Lacerta brought her comfort. The tiny lizard kept on a string around her neck scampered beneath her tunic and the crevice between her breasts. It was her only friend, gaining warmth and food even though fidelity was at the end of a tether. It shared space with the fascinum charm Pinna wore to ward off ghouls and flesh-eating witches who squabbled with phantoms in the darkness.

This tiny phallus was not potent enough, though, to protect her from the urgent hunger and mean souls of her clients. Both men and specters could make her blood quiver and raise goose bumps upon her skin.

When lightning flared she could not bring herself to continue plying her trade. The fear of being seared by a storm bolt struck her with terror. As thunder erupted, she ran through the rows of tombs towards home, the wind blowing out her lamp.

As the storm lit the Campus Martius she huddled for a moment outside a crypt of the Claudian clan. The tomb was built from marble with a boar's crest emblazoned upon it, impressive as the history of this family. Hoping to gain shelter, she edged towards its entrance only to find a light within. Crouching inside were two young men, the fineness of their woolen cloaks and the cut of their tunics declaring they were noblemen, not grave robbers.

As she hid beside the opening, curiosity overcame fear. Inside, a lantern was propped on a shelf, which housed a line of urns as though their ashy occupants were on parade. One man, lean and angular, was absorbed in writing upon a beaten sheet of lead, his auburn hair common to a descendant of the Sabines. The other watched him, the lines of his face somber with concentration, the bridge of his nose scarred, the skin puckered at the corner of his eye.

Around her, shadows stained surfaces from gray to pitch. Pinna could see the russet-haired man was inscribing a message, laboring over the task as would a schoolboy with stylus and wax tablet. There was anger in the strokes as he gripped the pen. Her eyes widened. What he was doing was forbidden. And she knew why

he had to be careful. Casting a curse was a serious business. Carving damnation upon a lead defixio sheet needed precision if a guarantee of harm was to be achieved.

"It's finished, Marcus. Now I'll add it to the others so that he will be thrice cursed." He turned to the wall of the crypt where two other defixios had already been nailed.

His friend was frowning as he examined the two aging leaden sheets spiked to the brickwork. "When did you write these?"

The patrician's reply was bitter. "The first one on the night he wed her. The second, a year later, when she chose to return to the Veientane and this war began."

Marcus grimaced, squeezing his friend's shoulder. "I'm ashamed of what she did to you, Drusus. Ashamed also of how Caecilia disgraced the Aemilian family and dishonored our clan. Choosing Veii over Rome. Him over you."

Drusus picked up the defixio. "She also insulted the Claudians when she spurned me. The Etruscan may have corrupted her but she's a degenerate, too. She is dead to me and should suffer when her husband is destroyed. I pray this curse comes true."

Marcus placed his hand over his friend's. "But are you sure you want to do this? Curse a man? The penalty is death if this is discovered."

The Claudian slid his hand away and brandished the leaden sheet. "It's not a citizen but an enemy of Rome I seek to doom. And don't worry. If I ever get the chance I will relish killing him. In the meantime, why not invoke evil spirits to plague a foe?"

Marcus prized the defixio from his friend's fingers. "Then let me read it aloud. They say a hex is stronger that way. If he is to be condemned then let it be done with vehemence."

His voice was earnest, steady; the words chilling. "I consecrate Vel Mastarna to damnation. May his mind and soul be tormented, his body twisted and shattered, his tongue cut out and his ears and eyes pierced by hot pokers. And if he has, or shall have, any money or inheritance, may they be lost, and his entire house be stricken with disaster and destruction."

Drusus smiled as he listened to this relegation of an enemy to darkness. "Then you think it is enough?"

Marcus nodded as he handed Drusus the sheet. "Yes, it is enough. It is no small thing to wish such a fate upon a man."

It had begun to rain, making Pinna creep further inside. She shivered. It was not a Roman name but it was a Roman curse. Brutal and annihilating. And she

understood the reason, and why Marcus Aemilius would disown his cousin. Vel Mastarna and Aemilia Caeciliana. Their names would be linked forever. An enemy and a traitoress.

Their wedding day was one that Pinna would remember always, but for a very different reason, because it was on that summer's day, at the age of eleven, that she became a whore.

Unlike others, she did not watch the wedding procession wind its way through the crowded streets, nor did she spy the groom's caravan departing the next day on its journey to Veii. Although she heard later that both were solemn proceedings since many felt sorry that Aemilia Caeciliana was being married to an enemy to seal a truce. But not Pinna. She felt too sorry for herself. Pinna did not see them because she needed to take advantage of the crowd. A state occasion was good for business.

At eleven she was too young to be a wife. Not too young, though, to remain a virgin. The stonemason's son who picked his ears and tasted of stone dust claimed that prize in an awkward coupling. It had made Pinna wonder why women would seek a repetition unless they were paid. Until she slept with a customer and knew that no amount of bronze would ever be enough.

Her first was a fat oaf who hummed before, during and after. A thin little whine that set her teeth on edge, a tuneless melody to accompany his groping. At least the next was quick on a day that seemed to last forever as one man after another taught her what was expected of a harlot. And over the years she had borne the same and worse. But not Aemilia Caeciliana. In that time she fell in love with a foe and started a war.

Marcus placed his hand on Drusus' back. "Forget Caecilia. Think instead of how we will tear down Veii's wall."

Drusus shrugged him away. "Only if Camillus is given the chance to lead an assault! I'm sick of lesser generals commanding us at Veii. And now we will have to wait another year for him to be given the chance to be elected as one of the six consular generals."

The muscles in Marcus' shoulders tensed. "Don't forget my father is one of those 'lesser' men. I am proud of serving under him. He gained more ground this year than any other commander."

Drusus flushed crimson as he stammered: "I meant no offense. General Aemilius is a fine man. I've learned much from him. But neither he nor any other of our leaders have taken Veii. It's time Camillus is given the task." Suddenly his voice no longer faltered. "You have to admit there is fire in him. Look how he succeeded against the Volscians this year."

Marcus smiled. "I agree. He has the power to lead men to victory. It would be a privilege to be under his command," he continued. "But it is unlikely that would ever happen. My father would never approve."

A sheet of lightning pierced the inner darkness, cutting short any reminiscences. Marcus drew his cloak around him. "It's time to leave. Nail the curse to the wall and let us be gone."

Drusus shook his head. "You go. I want to stay a little longer."

Worried Marcus would discover her as he left, Pinna stepped back outside, flattening herself against the shadows of the tomb wall. She smiled to see the Aemilian shiver from more than cold as he quickened his step to dodge any tortured spirits that might detain him.

The rain was steady, the water trickling down the back of her neck to mingle with the ash on her skin. She was quaking too. A layer of sackcloth did little to ward off the cold. Thunder grumbled, encouraging her once again to take up her position within the crypt. Drawn to watch.

Drusus had taken another sheet of lead from his cloak. His list of enemies must indeed have been long. Growing bolder, she crept closer, peering over to his handiwork. The words were cut deep with the force of frustration and, surprisingly, for an educated man, his lettering was crude.

This time tears flowed as he wrote. This time his fingers trembled as he held the stylus. She was confused at how determined he was to use the defixios. Rich young officers were expected to defeat their enemies in battle, not by calling on dark fate to stab them in the back.

Intent on his task, he did not notice her. His tongue was pushed into one cheek as though he had eaten a slice of apple. A frown split his brow, his eyelashes stuck with wetness. A snail's trail of clear snot was smeared along the top of his lip where he had wiped his nose.

Pinna wondered who could cause a soldier to weep even as he damned them, but as Drusus read his sentence aloud, one finger painstakingly tracing the words, she was stunned. It was no curse but an enchantment.

"May Aemilia Caeciliana burn with dreams. Let her feel aflame for Drusus so that she may know love, and Drusus peace."

He must have heard her surprise. He lifted his head, voice wavering and his neck tensing as though the hair was rising on his skin. "Who's there?"

Too frightened to speak she turned to flee, but the man crossed the gap between them in one stride and dragged her into the lantern light. He was lean, raw-boned and strong, filling the cramped space in the low-ceilinged chamber. Realizing a mere night moth was observing him rather than a Shade, his arrogance emerged.

“You little slut, how long have you been listening?”

She was filled with a familiar sense of dread, sensing there was an edge to this man, a tinge of violence, a need for power—even over a night moth of eighteen.

Humoring them sometimes averted the pain. The highborn did not seek out tomb whores, but she suspected that under his fine woolen weave this one’s prick and needs would be the same. “It’s more exciting when you know a lemur spirit is watching.” She took his hand and rubbed it along the damp skin of her breasts while lifting the hemline of her tunic.

Lacerta darted across his fingers. Startled, Drusus shoved the girl away. “Get out! I can smell your last customer upon you.”

“Please, my lord, I’m afraid of the lightning.”

He raised the lamp higher to scan her. Pinna studied him, too—his tear-stained face, his reddened nose. Thinking her no threat, he pushed her away. “Leave!” He picked up the mallet, centering the nailhead to hammer in both sheets. “Go back to fucking the city’s scum.”

Pinna should have known better, should have obeyed meekly as she’d done all her life. Yet his words stirred her ire. Contempt taught her by her family for the haughtiness of patricians. This man was dismissing her when it was he who should be ridiculed. There had never been time or money enough to indulge her in learning, but even though she could not read she had heard treason spoken plainly.

“I may be a night moth but I do not pine after a traitor. You’re a fool to declare your love for Aemilia Caecilia. What would Rome think if it knew you would betray it for that bitch?”

He clipped her jaw, felling her, his fury exploding; a long pent-up wrath transcribed within a curse and now transferred to force.

Pinna did not cry nor sob nor wail. She was paid to do that at other people’s funerals. There was nothing left within her to lament her own pain. She cowered before him, waiting for the next blow, knowing that some men cannot stop at one as though an odd number was a bad omen. When he raised his hand again he knocked the spell to the floor. Realizing in one brief moment of brightness that it could save her, Pinna scrambled to retrieve it, running out into the downpour, the needles slicing through her clothes.

The soldier blundered after her but the graveyard was hers. She knew where to hide.

“Night moth, stop! Give that to me. It’s not what you think.”

Her mother had taught her their trade, but Pinna had learned business opportunity from experience. Patricians always talked of honor. A commodity

that was affordable when a man wasn't starving. They detested being shamed. She perched upon one of the tombs, taunting Drusus as she held the leaden sheet high above her. "Hit me again and I will nail this to the speaker's platform. Word will soon spread that a Claudian is lovesick for a betrayer. That he needs magic to overcome his foe."

"Come down, I won't hurt you," he shouted, his beard and hair dripping, his robes sodden as he swiped at her feet with one arm. She shuffled back, alarmed at his height. She'd not realized how tall he was as he'd crouched over his inscription.

"Do you think that, because I'm a whore, I'm stupid?" She prayed he would not manage to drag her down and beat her, and to her relief he stopped his pursuit. Drusus leaned his head against the wall, shoulders slumping, letting the rain smash upon his face.

Pinna slipped the defixio into her tunic to let Lacerta guard it. The pain of the welt upon her chin and cheek smarted. Unsure if she was being foolish, she slid down beside him. She was embarrassed for him, uncomfortable at seeing a warrior display such emotion. Felt sorry, briefly, that an enemy could cause a soldier this type of wound.

Fumbling at his clothes, he pulled out a purse and shook two weights onto her palm. "Please, you must tell no one about this."

Pinna stared at the bronze with the boars stamped upon them. She'd never seen so much wealth in her life. The currency this patrician had tumbled into her hands was life-changing, not small change.

At that moment the rain ceased, a few patters of errant drops hitting them as the wind swept through the graveyard. Then all was still, dripping, puddles forming.

The night moth stared at him, then retrieved the defixio from her clothes. He snatched it from her, drying it with his sleeve.

"Don't cross me." He straightened his shoulders, confidence regained. "Or I will find you and kill you."

His threat was pointless. With the bronze now hers, Pinna didn't care about the strips of lead that weighed heavy in both his hand and mind.

As she watched the nobleman thread his way back through the sepulchres to the Claudian tomb, Pinna did not try to follow. She knew what he would do. How he would clench the mallet, knuckles whitening, and hammer both desire and curse into the brickwork with one long iron nail—to remain there forever potent and terrible, guarded by ghosts.

TWELVE - SEMNI

Veii, Autumn, 398 BC

At times Semni felt as though she was no more than a kiln, a furnace to form the infant inside her with her body's heat.

Wiping sweat from her forehead, she waited for one of the slaves to heave aside the stone cover of the enormous oven. It was not just the force of the fire that made her perspire. She was always hot now. Hot and weary. Her fecund body a burden. Once again the baby gained her attention, pressing its limbs against the walls of her womb. Sliding her hand beneath her heavy leather apron she rubbed her belly, the navel protruding, and cursed the small being within.

Heat blasted the air as the door was opened. Semni shielded her face from the roaring fierceness. The slave slid the tray of dried pots onto the shelf inside. The door was slammed shut. The firing began.

She had worked all morning on the pieces. Bucchero wine jugs. Not coiled but fashioned on the wheel. Stamps of maenads and satyrs dancing on their sides. Expensive. Destined to grace rich men's tables.

Semni sat down once again to her work. Her hands were caked. Using the back of her wrist, she pushed away strands escaping from the tenuous knot that held back her thick hair. She liked the steady pace to creation, the kick to start the flywheel, the stone blurring with speed as she centered the clay, slurry coating hands and splashing forearms as she hollowed the lump and raised it, contours swelling and tapering in the spinning. Later she would burnish the surface, rubbing a polished stone across the texture, friction forming smoothness, her arms strong from practice. Finally applying the coating of moist slip, which would give the pottery its color.

Inside the workshop it was always stifling. The temperature soared from the heat of the kilns in the internal courtyard. The chill of the autumn morning did not permeate the walls. Most of the potters worked bare-chested in loincloths, skin streaked with sweat and clay, feet dusty.

Before Semni had grown large, the men had enjoyed flirting with her, although none were foolish enough to do so when her husband was looking. They would ogle her as she labored, spying through the sides of her apron how the sweat made her thin shift cling to deep cleavage, nipples, curved hips and rounded buttocks. How she hitched the fabric high to reveal firm pliant thighs parted around the wheel. She would flash them sly sloe-eyed smiles and dimples, the warm pink tip

of her tongue peeking from a full-lipped mouth, hinting at how it could be put to better use.

And with some she had done more than flirted. Enjoying the power she had to arouse both jealousy and their manhood. She had a body made for lusting but now, gravid and swollen-limbed, she gained no attention. Forbidden territory, no longer alluring. The men who had been prepared to cuckold her husband were not so keen to do so when he was to be a father.

Not that the old goat, Velthur, was likely to be the sire. His sixty years had robbed him of his vigor. She did not complain. At least this limited their coupling. He rarely hardened unless using a switch on her before eventually being able to finish with a different type of rod. She doubted that he was virile enough to seed a child.

Instead, Semni believed that the infant's father was a stag or boar or ram; perhaps wolf or fox or bear. There had been many masked men she'd lain with on the night of the Winter Feast, drunk on ecstasy and unwatered wine. The child could even be half noble. The high priest had also mounted her as she worshipped. Despite wearing a bull's mask, his size had been disappointing. She'd expected more from the god's servant. She even enjoyed imagining that her soul had merged with Fufuns, conceiving a son who would be half divine.

The baby kicked her again, reminding Semni that its holiness was a fantasy. She shifted her weight, trying to get comfortable upon her seat, her bulk hindering her posture.

Of course she had tried to purge it with the aid of laurel and lupin but, unlike other times, it did not slip early from her womb. And yet she did not try to scrape it away. Not when she'd watched one of her sisters die that way. Her lack of courage and the infant's stubbornness only made resentment grow.

Absorbed in her thoughts it took her some time to notice the other potters were standing. Lady Caecilia had arrived. A ripple of bows tracked the noblewoman's progress across the floor together with echoes of respectful greeting.

The Roman was accompanied by a small companion who gripped his mother's hand. The boy called Tas. The princip often brought one of her sons with her, always cautioning them that curious fingers could suffer burns. Aricia followed, grinning as she caught sight of Semni. The surly Arruns walked behind. Semni eyed him, pleased the Phoenician was once again detailed to look after his mistress.

Lady Caecilia was well liked by those in the workshop even if outsiders were wary of her. For she had freed all the potters and sculptors in her employ. Other

owners were not so generous. Most of the artisans in the pottery quarter were enslaved. It was no wonder her staff was prepared to forget she was a Roman. They recognized her fairness, and admired her eagerness to inspect their work at the risk of dirtying her finery. They respected her, too, for knowing the names of their families and visiting them to offer medicine and food.

There was another reason Semni was fond of her employer. Lady Caecilia had become her patron. The workshop was renowned for its masterpieces. It was a world of treasure: fine terracotta, shiny bucchero. Most precious of all, though, were the vessels that boasted red figures within polished black. It was these vases that the noblewoman commissioned Semni to produce. A dream the girl had harbored since childhood. An opportunity to rival her father's fame.

Semni was only fifteen but all her life she'd been surrounded by ornament and beauty as well as noise and smoke and danger. Daughter of a sculptor famed throughout Etruria, she had spent her childhood mopping slurry and sweeping dust, collecting shards and fetching water. Yet the chance of learning how to throw and decorate pots was denied her. And before her father died he married her to Velthur, the workshop foreman, with an expectation she produce grandsons, not artwork.

Her husband was easier to convince than her father. He was prepared to indulge his young wife in gratitude for her tricks in bed. It was a bonus when he discovered Semni was also skillful in another way. Her father may have bequeathed all he owned to her brothers but he'd left his daughter one thing—his talent.

A sudden thread of pain traveled from one buttock down her leg as Semni curtsied to Lady Caecilia. She lurched a little, then, arching, massaged the small of her back.

The mistress gestured to Semni to resume her seat at the flywheel. "Come and sit."

The girl hesitated before obeying, conscious that it was the noblewoman who should be seated. The little master lingered beside his mother, his amber eyes piercing. Semni found his stare unnerving, thinking it too solemn for one so young.

"Your aches will end after you have borne your baby," said the princip. "You must be due any day now."

"Yes, my lady."

"And then you will know a happiness you can't imagine."

Semni nodded politely. She doubted she would feel any elation. The burden of carrying the child would only give way to the load of rearing it. She glanced over

to Aricia. Lady Caecilia had servants to care for her children. There would be no such luxury for Semni, just a cycle of suckling and dirty swaddling. She'd seen her mother worn out by the birthing of many children. Only four had survived. And the poor woman and her eighth had died together.

Lady Caecilia moved across to Semni's worktable. Tas trailed after her like a shadow. The potter stole a glance at the woman. The Roman was tall and slender. It was as though she had not borne three children. Semni doubted it would be the same for her. There would be sagging instead of firmness, padding instead of curves, slackening instead of tautness. Worst of all, Velthur had made it clear there would be no more flawless creations from pure clay. No loveliness from her labors. Semni's only job would be as a mother.

"This is very fine." The mistress examined a vase drying on the table.

Keen to show off her workmanship, Semni rose and stood beside her. A faint scent of lilies clung to the aristocrat making Semni conscious that she must stink of sweat and clay.

Two lovers were etched onto the surface of the vessel. Fufluns and Areatha. The sheer robes swathing their nakedness seemed almost real as they embraced: faces close, lips almost touching, gazing rapt into each other's eyes. "See, my lady? I've incised the figures in readiness for painting."

Lady Caecilia examined the tracery with a bejeweled finger. "It's beautiful. Lord Mastarna is very fond of the wine god and his wife."

Semni was sure she caught sight of a fleeting frown at odds with the compliment.

Lady Caecilia carefully returned the vase to the artisan. "Such a pity it will be your last commission. I've come to tell all of you that the workshop must now only produce terracottas."

It took a moment for the girl to digest the news, her surprise momentarily overcoming deference. "But why?"

The princip raised her eyebrows. "Why? Because of the blockades, of course. The king has ordered that we must supply the army with essentials. It's no use creating goods that cannot be traded beyond our city."

Semni still struggled to understand. "Do you really think the Romans won't go home this winter?"

Lady Caecilia shook her head. "Rome means to besiege us until we starve, even if its soldiers must suffer hunger and sickness. Surely you must know that. Remember how they returned before the spring thaw this year? Now fall is upon us and they are still camped outside our walls."

Hearing the soft criticism in the princip's voice made Semni feel foolish. Then annoyed. She was not a child needing to be chided. Her memory of the enemy returning to dig new siege lines in the snow was vivid. Unease had filled her at how the Romans were breaking the rules, displaying gritty menace in the breach.

Then Lord Kurvenas had been elected as lucumo. Old Velthur worried taxes would increase and corruption spread as it had under King Tulumnes. To Semni, though, there seemed little dissimilarity between the reign of magistrate and monarch. War flourished under both.

Yet over the months, cocooned in the workshop, Semni could allow herself to forget the city was encircled. Her days were much the same as in other, more peaceful years, except for less food on the table. She let others worry. Even in a siege everyday life continued. Merchants still bartered, blacksmiths shod horses and weavers cut cloth even as troops sallied forth from Vei's gates or showered arrows from its walls. Yet now Lady Caecilia was saying the workshop must become a factory manufacturing basics: bowls and beakers for the army, amphorae to store provisions, cauldrons for boiling oil or water. And, hearing this, Semni suddenly understood why others resented this woman.

Looking momentarily discomfited, the mistress drew her son to stand in front of her. "Believe me, Semni, I want peace as much as you do. Now, I must speak to the others. But perhaps Tas could stay and watch you."

Semni glanced at the boy. His small quietness throughout the conversation had made her forget him. She nodded, fond of children as long as they weren't hers.

Lady Caecilia patted the girl's hand. "Don't be too disappointed. I'm sure the time will come when you'll make beautiful things again. But for now simple terracottas must suffice."

Semni watched the princip greet the next artisan and break the news. It was kind of the mistress to take the time to speak to each one of them in turn.

Once his mother had gone, Tas ventured nearer to observe the potter prepare her brushes for painting. Aricia hastened to fetch a stool for the boy. "It's wonderful to see you again, Semni. I was so pleased when the mistress decided to bring the little master."

Semni nodded. She always enjoyed talking to the Greek girl when she visited the workshop. It bemused her, though, as to why the nursemaid was so effusive at such meetings.

"Sit here, my pet," said Aricia, hovering behind Tas.

Concentrating on stirring the paint, Semni said absently, "Where are his brothers?"

"With Perca, the junior nursemaid. I wanted to accompany the mistress so I could see you again."

Semni smiled but wondered whether Aricia had any friends. The girl seemed lonely.

Unused to the heat, Tas took off his woolen cap and laid it on his lap. Semni wondered if shyness hindered speech yet he seemed confident enough as his strange golden eyes followed each of her movements.

Aricia peered over Semni's shoulder. Noticing the faint scent of violets, the potter envied the maid's good fortune to wear such perfume. There were benefits to being a princip's servant. She looked up from her task. "How is the Gorgon?"

The nursemaid glanced at Tas, reminding Semni that little children had big ears. She doubted, though, that he would understand that the Gorgon was Aricia's mother, Cytheris. Risking the chance the boy could report their gossip, she continued. "Is she still as mean as you say?"

Aricia nodded. "I'm sick of her slaps and pinches. She might be happy to remain in service but I'm a freedwoman and have other plans."

Semni frowned. "And what would you do?"

"Be a priestess."

The potter snorted. "Don't be silly. Only noblewomen can be ordained. Besides, you should be thankful for living in a mansion, plump with food and wearing Aegyptian linen and Milesian wool."

Arica flicked black curls away from her face. "You sound just like her. She doesn't understand me either. And now she wants me to marry Arruns."

Semni turned her attention to the Phoenician who stood guard at the doorway. Swarthy, shaven head, hooded eyes, hooked nose. All knew him for the blue tattooed snake slithering around his torso and neck, its fangs biting into his face. Arruns did not frighten her, though. Semni imagined him to be a potent lover. She was sure she'd forget his grimness when squeezed beneath the expanse of his chest and between the strong thews of his thighs. "Why are you complaining? You have to marry sometime. You're already fifteen." She snuck a look at the guard again. "Don't you think Arruns is worth bedding?"

"It's not always about men!" Aricia snapped. "I don't want to be confined to the square of any man's home. I just told you. I want to be a priestess of the Calu Cult. I want to serve Aita."

Semni sighed. "You should forget about that dismal death cult. Revere Fuflungs instead. Enjoy his revels. Seek life. Hallow resurrection."

Aricia gestured towards Semni's belly. "I'm sure Velthur doesn't appreciate you worshipping the wine god."

Semni laughed at the unexpected quip. It suddenly made her warm to the nursemaid. She glanced at the guard again. She'd heard that Arruns had been the Phersu. Although she was not a follower of the death cult, it strangely excited her that he had performed holy deeds. "Arruns once acted as Aita's instrument. I would have thought that would appeal to you."

"He's no believer. He told me so. Just a killer Lord Mastarna has retained."

Semni frowned. Arruns was more than a bodyguard. He was a warrior who fought in the light infantry when his general rode to war. "Still, you could do worse."

To her surprise, Tas tapped her on the shoulder. "But Aricia would be very tired if she shared a bed with Arruns."

The potter blinked. Throughout their conversation the boy had been studying the vase. She'd thought him uncomprehending.

Aricia blushed. Semni giggled. "And why is that, young master?"

"Because Arruns never sleeps. He told me he must keep his eyes open."

Semni's laughter doubled. "Sleepless nights are exactly what your nurse needs!"

"Enough." Aricia scowled, then bent down to Tas, voice gentle. "Let's return to your mother, my pet."

"No! I don't want to!"

To Semni's disapproval, Aricia complied without question. Clearly the little master's petulance was often tolerated. Nevertheless, the nursemaid mouthed a warning behind the boy's head. "No more talk."

The potter smiled, returning to her work, deftly painting the background around the lovers, filling in the thin grooved outlines with precise strokes of a fine-bristled brush, the untouched clay giving form to the figures.

Unable to contain curiosity, Tas piped up again. "Why are you using red paint? It should be black."

"Because the slip is magic."

"Slip?"

"The clay and potash paint."

"It doesn't smell like magic."

Semni leaned towards him, tone conspiratorial. "Oh, that's because I like to mix a little piss with it."

He screwed up his nose, and when his expression remained skeptical, Semni pointed to the kiln. "See how the slave has placed a tile over the chimney so there is less air? It will make the furnace hotter. When the vase is placed inside, the slip

melts and turns black, leaving the unpainted figures red as the fire cools. Is that not magic?"

Tas digested the information with a nod, then moved onto his next question. "Is she a goddess?"

"Who?"

He pointed to the woman on the vase. "Her."

"No, she is a mortal. That's her husband, Fuflungs, the wine god. Her name is Areatha, but Greek people like Aricia call her Ariadne. Do you know her story?"

"Only that she helped These slay the Minotaur and then escaped with him."

"Ah, but on their way home they stopped at an island, and when she was sleeping These deserted her."

The boy frowned. "Areatha must have been very sad."

"Not for long because, you see, she fell in love with Fuflungs. The god found her while she was sleeping and took her as his bride."

"And never left her?"

"Never. They live together even now. The most devoted of divine couples."

"But Aricia says that Lord Aita and Persiphnae love each other more than any others. They are rulers of the Beyond. I'll meet them after I die."

"Yes, my pet." His nursemaid tugged at the boy to stand, the gesture showing a nervousness the potter did not quite understand. "Now let's leave Semni to her work and find your mother." This time Tas allowed himself to be hustled away.

Shortly after, Semni noticed Tas' cap must have fallen from his lap. She retrieved it from the floor, brushing off the dust. Not inclined to heave her weight from the stool, Semni called to Arruns to fetch it. The Phoenician ignored her. He always snubbed her advances. To be perverse, she called even louder. He reluctantly approached.

"Master Tas dropped this." She handed him the hat. As he took it from her she ran her fingers along one vein of his corded arm. "You know," she said, voice husky. "I won't always be with child."

Arruns shook off her hand, hooded eyes cold. "You should look to your husband."

Semni laughed, studying the blue serpent on the Phoenician's torso. Her fingers drifted down his chest and stomach towards his groin. "Are you ever going to show me if it's a two-headed snake?"

His palm engulfed her hand, his touch light, but she knew he could hurt her with the merest pressure.

"I only lie with women, not spoiled children."

She pulled away, pouting and pointing to her belly. "Do you think I'd be like this if I wasn't a woman?"

"Semni, the babe inside you is probably wiser than you."

His barb stung. The baby edged its foot under her ribs. She poked it, cursing again.

The stoker called to her as he opened the furnace, querying whether she wished to check the pots before placing them into sand to cool. She gestured for him to continue, then picked up the vase, caressing it. Out of fire would come perfection. The child within her would never be as exquisite. What would it look like? Fawn or lamb, calf or cub? And what would her husband do if he found the child was not of his loins? Hopefully it would only bear a resemblance to her.

She thought of Lady Caecilia's announcement then realized that it didn't really matter that the workshop was to become a factory. With motherhood, any chance to gain fame would disappear.

Semni turned the vessel over and raised the scalpel, incising her name onto its base. Only the best artisans were entitled to do so. This would be the last time she would make such a mark. A spattering of tears darkened the clay.