

CHAPTER ONE

The spy made landfall the evening before the chariot races began.

His ship sailed in on a narrow slide of sunlight, splitting the green-grey water from the blue-grey sky. The sails were already unstrung, alive in the snapping breeze. The berthing oars were out. Three pairs swept down either side of the wide beam, making of the *Blue Mackerel* a beetle, stalking into dock. A string of seagulls swayed over her wake.

She could have been any one of the sleek merchant sloops that flitted back and forth across the narrow stretch of sea from Britain to the small, crowded harbour at Coriallum on the northern coast of Gaul, but for the discreet purple pennant flying from the foremast that said she sailed on the emperor's business.

At any other time, that might have been a lie contrived to increase the fares charged for passage, but not when Nero had honoured Coriallum with his presence for the chariot races, and was in temporary residence in the magistrate's villa at the top of the hill.

As ever, the harbour was heaving with men, women, children, dogs and gulls, all watching the *Mackerel* come in. The furled dockside stench of old fish, fresh dog shit,

rotting vegetables and seaweed was buried beneath the sweat of a hundred busy bodies.

Stevedores and fishermen leaned in pairs on bollards, picking their teeth, discussing the swell of the sea and the sharp iron taste of the air. Women balanced on either hip baskets of bread and dried figs and dried seaweed that blended their scents with the richer, rounder scent of the fresh wrack that hung from pillars beneath the pier. Old men coiled ropes and mended nets, bare-headed in the blustering wind. Half-naked children played games of tag, dodging round the legs of their elders.

A grubby urchin fishing from the pier's end watched the adults covertly from the shelter of a wide-brimmed straw hat. As he did every day, he assessed the size and weight of their belt-pouches by sound alone, and then checked to see whether those of interest were armed, and what kinds of looks they threw him there at the pier's end, if they chose to notice him at all. The boy-whores of Coriallum were notorious, but not everyone wished to be seen to be looking.

The boy's name was Math, common enough amongst the Gauls. He paid the *Mackerel* no attention at all until the wake from her arrival slewed the mess of flotsam and jetsam floating up against the pier, upsetting the lie of his line. Then, he cursed, loudly enough to be heard, drew up his cord, set fresh collops of mussel on the half-dozen hooks and dropped it back into the water with a splash.

Tying it off, he leaned sideways against a mooring stone. Tilting his hat against the low afternoon sun, he allowed himself a lazy look at the men who had bought, or been given, passage on the emperor's ship.

The first six ashore were Romans, green-faced and swaying on their sea legs, more bookish than bred to the sea. Ink stains on their fingers and the level cut of their hair gave them away as clerks in the governor's retinue, sent with the endless quartermaster's lists, of weapons,

corn, hides, horses, men, hounds and slaves, and most particularly of the taxes with which Roman officialdom was obsessed.

Math felt the quality of their glances as they passed. On any other day, he might have considered making a play, but the clerks smelled of vomit and were clearly too ill to think of anything beyond an unswaying bed. None of them threw him a coin to pay for an 'evening meal'.

To make sure they wouldn't think of it, he squirmed his buttocks on the boards of the pier as if his arse itched, and then scratched urgently at his groin.

Ajax the charioteer had taught him that when they had first talked. *There are men who will take you and not pay, however fast you might be with a knife. But if they think you're infected, they'll not come within an arm's reach.*

Ajax wanted him to be a race-driver, or at least to earn an honest living. The advice on simulating the pox had been given reluctantly, but that didn't mean it wasn't good. When Math turned back to look, the green-faced clerks had gone.

A dozen merchants followed them off the ship. They had better sea legs but carried about them the nervous aura of risk-takers, vivid as a whore's scent. Lining up along the dock, they shouted instructions to the gathering stevedores concerning the immense worth of their goods and the disasters that would befall if anything were damaged in the lifting from boat to dock.

There was a long gap then, filled busily by block-and-tackle work with ropes so that the boy thought no one else was coming ashore and that he had lost his fee.

'Fuck.' He said it quietly, but one of the stevedores heard him and reached to snatch the hat from his head. Beneath it, Math's hair hung to his shoulders in a skein of dirty gold, gone to straw in the damp sea air. Set over a slim neck and a thin, interesting face, it shone brightly enough

to lift him from the run of the gutter-thieves who worked the docks.

The stevedore whistled an obscenity and mimed the spin of a coin through the air, then sent the hat to follow. Math spat an insult back and retrieved his hat. A ripple of laughter made the unloading work flow faster for a moment. Cursing colourfully, Math began to coil in his line.

His attention had only been gone from the ship for a moment, but it was enough – almost too much.

The man he had been sent to watch stepped lightly ashore between a bale of stinking, uncombed sheep's fleece and a crate of tin ingots so massive that it took four of the laughing men to lift and haul it, and even then it rebounded off the dock and fractured, spreading shards of almost-silver across the stained oak boards. Two ingots slid noiseless into the sea, too heavy to splash. The merchant whose crate it was screamed as if the stevedores had stabbed him.

The slight, slouch-shouldered figure that was the boy's mark sprang sideways as the crate bounced off the side of the dock for a second time. In his bare feet and rough, undyed tunic, he might have been anything from another clerk to a deckhand released early from the boat.

Math knew he was neither. Leaning back on the bollard, he let his hat droop and droop until he was looking through a gap in the brim. A stranger might have thought him asleep, which would have been foolish, but then grown men commonly made foolish assumptions about Math of the Osismi, most common of which was that he was charming, shy, and naturally honest and had never whored himself before.

The scrawny old Roman who had paid him to watch the harbour had not made any such assumptions, which was the first point in his favour. The second was that he'd offered a whole sestertius to Math as payment if he could watch for and then follow a particular passenger stepping

ashore from the *Blue Mackerel*. The fee was more than Math earned in a month in his paid work for Ajax, and far more than he would have dared steal.

So that his quarry might not be missed, the scrawny Roman had given detailed physical characteristics of the man he was expecting to sail into Coriallum on the emperor's ship. *He has dark hair, not so striking as the fire-copper of your mad Gaulish countrymen who race their chariots so recklessly for the amusement of the emperor, nor yet the obsidian black of the Greeks, but somewhere between: a deep oak-brown that does not quite catch the eye.*

The man's hair was not catching anyone's eye; a straggling wood-dark nest that had been combed some time not long ago and then uncombed by the sea wind straight after. It lifted again now, jerkily, as he stepped over the fallen ingots to walk down the dock.

He was not a whole man. The old Roman had said so and it was true. Had he been paraded at the autumn horse fair, Ajax would have passed him over, leaving lesser men to bid good silver for a beast that was not overtly lame, yet not perfectly sound.

Ajax had an eye for such things and Math was learning it. So he saw that the man's right shoulder was lower than it should have been and he favoured his left leg as if the hamstring were overly tight. He saw that his features were sharp, as if he had gone hungry through the winter, and summer had not filled the loss, leaving his cheeks too proud to be beautiful and his pressed lips too tight for love.

But nothing changed the core of what this man was – and that was fascinating. There had been just one stride that was not controlled, one stride as he slapped a flat palm to a bollard and sprang up from the gangplank to the dock that had left Math with sweat prickling his armpits in a way nothing had yet done in all his young life.

His name is Pantera, Sebastos Abdes Pantera. It means leopard. You know what that is? One of the great cats that hunt silently through the forests of the hot southern lands. Your mark is a leopard, and he hunts as one such. You will know him first and last by the way he moves. Even now, when he is wounded, and prone to bouts of untrammelled anger, you will know him thus.

And Math did know him thus; however hard he might try to look and act like a deckhand, Sebastos Abdes Pantera, he of the bland hair and the not-bland face, had made one unconscious spring on to the dock with the fluid motion of an athlete, of a man who knows the fine tuning of his body, and cares for it, and can use it as a weapon in any way he pleases.

Watching him take his leave of the merchant, Math felt the nervous itch in his armpits grow hotter. Flustered, he rose and slipped his fishing line over his shoulder, and took one last look at the direction Pantera was taking. Which was a mistake.

His eyes, should you ever see them, are green-brown, like the shimmer of sun on river water. At first glance, he looks through you – unless he wishes to kill you. Then he looks straight at you.

For the barest fraction of a heartbeat, those river-water eyes looked straight at Math, who looked away, and was left shaking as if he had ague. When he dared to look again, Pantera had gone, threading his way through the heaving crowd, stepping lightly over the dog dirt and the coiled ropes, and evading the running children with an unconscious ease. If he had a purse, it did not show. He brushed shoulders with no one.

Math did not run in pursuit, or even watch his quarry closely. The harbour was wide open, from the pier's end to the first row of merchant booths, taverns and brothels a hundred paces in from the sea. There were not many places to go and Math knew the quickest routes to all of

them. First, it mattered that no one on the pier should know whom he followed, or why.

Hefting his fishing line, Math turned and looked thoughtfully out at the sliver of sun that was left, at the long, narrow stretch of it on the sea. He wrapped his arms around his thin tunic against the rising wind that was already creaming the wavetops. He shivered and made a show of staring at the incoming clouds and then shrugged to himself and spat into the stinking seaweed below the harbour and picked at the hooks on his fishing line, casting the last few mussels to the gulls.

The birds made a commotion behind him, so that he could walk fast and his steps not be heard. Keeping a careful distance behind, he followed his mark up to the row of merchants' booths. When he reached the end of the pier, Math dropped the borrowed fishing line beside a box full of fish and stooped to rub his bare feet with a hank of dried seaweed, to clear them of fish-slime and filth from the docks.

A short while later, rising, he watched Pantera turning right, up the hill. Rubbing his hands dry on his tunic, Math set off to follow.