

PROLOGUE

Her whole world was orange.

Shifting her head to one side, feeling the weight of the veil, hearing it rustle, her eyes strained to focus through the fine weave.

Orange. The vegetable smell of the dye had been faint when she first donned the wedding veil, but now its scent filled her nostrils and mouth, the cloth pressing against her face as she walked to where the guests were waiting.

The atrium was crowded. So many people. Shaking, legs unsteady, Caecilia found she needed to lean against her aunt Aurelia. Through the haze of the veil she could barely make out the faces of the ten official witnesses or that of the most honoured guest, the Chief Pontiff of Rome.

And she could not see Drusus. Perhaps he could not bear to witness her surrender.

‘Stand straight, you’re too heavy,’ hissed her aunt, pinching the girl’s arm.

Biting her lip, Caecilia was led forward. The groom stood before the wedding altar, ready to make the nuptial offering. Her uncle Aemilius smiled broadly beside him.

Aunt Aurelia, acting as presiding matron, deposited her charge with a flourish, then fussed with the bride's mantle. She was revelling in the attention and smiled vacuously at her guests, but Caecilia was aware that, for so crowded a room, silence dominated.

Drawing back her veil, Caecilia gazed upon the stranger who was to become her husband. To her surprise, his black hair was close-cropped and he was beardless. She was used to the long tresses of the men of Rome—and their odour. This man smelled differently; the scent of bathwater mixed with sandalwood clung to his body.

Head bowed, she tried in vain to blot out his existence no more than a hand's breadth from her side, but she need not have bothered. He made no attempt to study either her face or form.

'The auspices were taken at sunrise,' declared Aemilius. 'The gods confirm the marriage will be blessed.'

Bride and groom sat upon chairs covered with sheepskin and waited while the pontiff offered spelt cake to Jupiter.

There was a pause as they stood and circled the altar, then the priest signalled Aurelia to join the couple's hands.

Caecilia wished she could stop shaking. She had to be brave. She had to be dignified. But her body would not obey her. She was still quaking when Aurelia seized her right hand roughly and thrust it into the groom's.

The warmth and strength of his grip surprised her. Her palm was clammy and it occurred to her that her hand would slip from his grasp. Slowly, she turned to face him. He was old; lines of age ploughed his forehead and creased his eyes. He must be nearly two score years. What was he like, this man? Her husband?

Aware that she should be making her vows to him in silence, she instead prayed fervently that the gods would take pity and not make her suffer too long or too hard in his keeping.

His hand still encompassed hers. Before releasing her fingers, he squeezed them slightly, the pressure barely perceptible. She held

her breath momentarily, amazed that the only mark of comfort she had received all day had been bestowed upon her by a foe.

She scanned his face. His eyes were dark and almond-shaped, like the hard black olives from her aunt's pantry. His skin was dark, too, sun dark. A jagged scar ran down one side of his nose to his mouth.

He was far from handsome.

His toga and tunic were of a rich dark blue making all stare at him for a difference other than his race. Yet his shoulders were held in a martial pose, no less a man for his gaudiness, it seemed, than the Roman patricians around him in their simple purple-striped robes. And the bridal wreath upon his head could have been a circlet of laurel leaves, a decoration for bravery, not nuptials.

A golden bulla hung around his neck, astounding her. For a man did not wear such amulets once he'd stepped over the threshold to manhood. Only children wore such charms in Rome. He wore many rings, too, but one in particular was striking. Heavy gold set with onyx. No Roman would garland himself with so much jewellery.

There was one other thing that was intriguing, making her wonder if his people found it hard to farewell childhood. His arms and his legs seemed hairless, as if they had been shaven completely.

Perfumed, short-cropped hair, no beard. Caecilia truly beheld a savage.

Once again she steeled herself, repeating silently: 'I am Aemilia Caeciliana. Today I am Rome. I must endure.'

WINTER

407 BC

ONE

All Romans feed on ambition. Like Romulus and Remus nuzzling greedily at the dugs of the she wolf. Lucius Caecilius was no different. Tugging on one teat for personal profit while gorging on another for public gain.

His daughter did not know this.

To Caecilia, her Tata was a champion of the people. One of ten tribunes empowered to veto unjust laws. The highest office a commoner could hold.

In a world riven by a bitter class war he had succeeded in marrying a patrician. His bride did not welcome the marriage, though, forever after hating her brother, Aemilius, for brokering the union.

Living on her husband's estate, away from the city of Rome, Aemilia bore the shame of her marriage in seclusion by refusing to greet other matrons who sought to visit.

Caecilia's memories of her mother were distant for the patrician woman cloistered herself within the rambling country house, and when confronted with her child looked disappointed, almost perturbed, that the proof of Aemilius' betrayal still lived and breathed and had taken form as a little girl.

Humiliation formed a canker both within and upon Aemilia's breast, and she lay in a darkened chamber brimming with stuttering coughs, rasping breaths and resentment. The air was heavy with the bittersweet scent of the hypericum oil she rubbed upon her sores that left a bright red stain as if to declare she could never be cured. To Caecilia, even the slightest hint of such an odour would forever more return her to that fetid room, assaulting all her senses. All except for one. All except for touch.

One day, though, Aemilia pressed a fascinum into her daughter's hand, a tiny phallus crafted from bone and tipped in iron. 'To keep away the evil eye,' she whispered. 'You, most of all, will need it.'

Such a gesture of concern caused confusion in the child as to whether her mother wished to protect her or thought she was already cursed.

While Aemilia lived, Lucius resided in the city, visiting rarely, always anxious to escape his wife's chilly reserve. And so, knowing nothing else than her mother's disdain and her father's diffidence, the young Caecilia learned to hide in shadowy corners away from the servants. For she soon understood from listening to their gossip that they saw her neither as a patrician nor even a plebeian but only as a brat.

Lonely and silent, she became invisible, only finding happiness when she could slip from dimness into sunlight to trace on foot the limits of her father's land, tying woollen puppets to the boundary stones to remind the spirits to remember and protect her.



When Aemilia died there was relief. An observation of duty. Nothing more. No tears. Tata hired mourners for that. Ashes caking their faces and hair. Keening. It must have been costly.

Freed of the gloom of that oppressive household, the little girl ran wild, dressed in dark blue mourning clothes but not grieving, using only oil and the scrape of iron strigil to keep clean, hair uncombed, chores left unattended, and wondering now and then whether she should weep.

Seeing Tata's reaction to his wife's death did not help her uncertainty. On the day her mother died, Lucius hesitated before placing his lips over Aemilia's, as though uncomfortable that he should inhale her dying soul with such a kiss.



Not long after the funeral, Caecilia ran into Tata's study to escape the rain leaking from under the atrium roof covers. Discovering in her father's domain a feast long denied her, the ten-year-old raided its secrets as hungrily as she plundered his beehives for honey, intrigued by scrolls that slithered and curled into rolls when she played with them, or wax tablets upon which words or numbers could be etched.

Summoned by his steward, Lucius was startled to find his wayward daughter guiltily handling his books as though she were a thief caught in his wine cellar.

To her surprise he did not chide her. Instead, father and daughter came to an understanding. Lucius' fingers were crippled by an affliction that made his joints gnarled and his flesh frozen with pain. It had become hard for him to hold a stylus without splattering ink or digging unwanted strokes onto a fresh page. And so he taught Caecilia to read and write, telling her the laws of their people and reciting unwritten customs in long, worn sentences. And in time she wrote his letters and read aloud to him when eyesight and candlelight were both failing.

Amid the tablets and scrolls, bills and invoices, inventories and manuals, Caecilia gained an education that would have been reserved for a son: religion and law, arithmetic and history.

She gained his love as well.

Each night, after she'd ground a salve of calendula by mortar and pestle, she'd massage his gnarled and tortured knuckles, smoothing the pungent ointment into his skin. And always, while she did so, he'd lace his crippled fingers between hers and murmur: 'My honey-eyed child, what would I do without you?'



Tata was wealthy. Being plebeian did not preclude riches. Riches built upon salt.

When given the chance, Caecilia would hungrily savour the grains sprinkled from the heavy saltcellar upon the table, sometimes pouring the precious particles onto the oak and making finger trails. And a supply was always certain because Tata owned a concession to a salt mine, a treasure trove at the mouth of the Tiber seized from the enemy city of Veii many years ago.

Despite possessing a fortune, Lucius lived humbly and was generous to the people, never forgetting it was they he represented in the Forum. Yet he could not always help them.

On the few occasions when Tata took Caecilia to the village she would sit safely within the confines of his carriage while he went about his business. For he treated her as a patrician virgin, forbidding her to drink wine and vigilantly guarding her virtue. By thirteen she was old enough to wed; her potential to marry an aristocrat valuable. Tata did not want such a chance threatened by a plebeian suitor. He wanted a grandchild that would be three quarters patrician. Nobility by degrees.

One day, when peeping through the gap in the carriage curtains, Caecilia saw a man in the square fettered in chains. Filth was spattered across his tunic, remnants of missiles lobbed at him by village urchins. The skin of his face and arms was burned, blisters forming, hair and beard caked with dirt. He looked hungry and thirsty and defeated, his humiliation heavier than his bonds.

A young girl stood beside him. It was not his daughter, wearing as she was the stola overdress and the hair bun of a matron. She carried a baby in her belly and one upon her hip. The little boy was screaming; cheeks red, his mouth so wide with sound it seemed he'd forgotten to take a breath. His mother, face lined and eyes weary, ignored him. She was too busy feeding her husband a watery gruel. He gulped it down, almost choking in his haste to take a mouthful.

Caecilia tugged at Tata's sleeve. 'Who is he?'

'A soldier who has fallen into debt. He's been chained there for nearly two months waiting for the magistrate to pass final judgment.'

Caecilia stared at the veteran. 'He is a citizen?'

Lucius frowned and sighed. 'Rome has many enemies, Cilla. Volscians in the south, Aequians in the east and the sleeping threat of the Veientes in the north. And so to defend our city our citizens march out to war in spring and only return in winter to plough and sow their land. While they are away their wives and children must see to the harvest which grows ever meagre with each passing year of drought. Debts accrue. Men return to impatient creditors. And so warriors who have not already sacrificed their lives return to forfeit their liberty instead.'

'And if he cannot pay his debts?'

Lucius carefully closed the curtains. 'He will become a bondsman, Cilla. Or his new master could do as the Laws of the Twelve Tables permits and sell him across the Tiber to become a slave.'

'And his wife and children?'

‘I will do what I can but the girl must hope her family will support her.’

‘And if you were a judge, could you help him?’

She felt him tense. ‘I’m afraid only patricians can be magistrate, judge or consul. To take office you need to light a sacred flame. A man must have holy blood to do that. And so, because no plebeian can claim a lineage to the gods, no plebeian will ever sit upon a magistrate’s ivory chair or thereafter don the purple-bordered toga of a senator in the Curia.’

Caecilia leaned against him so that her cheek was warmed by the soft wool of his cloak, bewildered by such injustice. ‘So a commoner will never govern Rome?’

Tata gently grasped her fingers. ‘Cilla, don’t you understand? That is why you are the future of this city, my own little patrician, proof that holy and mundane can merge. When there are more born like you all of Rome will feel the trickle of the divine within their veins and then no one can claim greater rights to power than another.’

Caecilia smiled, puffed with pride at hearing she had such purpose. Then uncertainty filled her. Just what part of her was godly? Her toes or elbows? Chin or shoulders? Some awkward part, no doubt. Gracefulness did not seem to have been ordained. And if indeed she possessed such blood, how was it that the servants scowled at her and even the cat would not heed what she said? Whatever doubts she had about herself, though, did not stop her believing in her father.

Yet over time, as gossip drifted on city breezes from the Forum, it slowly dawned on her that Tata no longer held office as a tribune of the people, and that his world had shrivelled, like his once-strong hands, to the confines of his farm.



Years later, on a night so cold the wind howled through the atrium's blackened rafters, Caecilia learned of Tata's true ambitions.

On that night, when Marcus Furius Camillus came to call, wearing a thick woollen toga edged in purple, the charcoal and flame flared within the hearth, making her wonder if he would douse the fire or fan it with his fervour.

'What brings you to the country on such a night, Senator,' asked Lucius, drawing aside the curtain to the doorway of his study, 'when you could be warming yourself in the Curia's heated debate?'

Caecilia followed closely behind Tata and the patrician. She could smell the faint odour of urine and sulphur used to clean his robes. His hands were strong and handsome compared to her father's, and he wore a gold signet ring, a touch of flamboyance for a society used to wearing iron.

Scanning the pile of books that lay scattered on the floor of the study, Camillus turned his attention briefly to her. 'Your daughter should be married, Lucius, not straining her eyes on reading.'

Tata nodded to Caecilia in dismissal as he led the senator to his study. The gesture was gentle but it was as though she had been slapped, reminding her of what a woman's place should be—would be—if not for his indulgence. She made a show of gathering up the scrolls to delay a moment longer.

'I came here to speak of war,' Camillus said.

Lucius seemed puzzled. 'Which war? Against the Volscians or the Aequians?'

'Why, against Veii, of course,' he said, glaring at Caecilia for still loitering. 'The murderers of our kinsmen and the coveters of Rome's salt mines.'

Caecilia's eyes widened. The ruthlessness and treachery of the Veientanes could never be forgotten. They had killed Tata's brothers and many other Romans before the present treaty was signed. Knowing this she frowned as she left the study wondering

if the Etruscans planned to steal the salt mines that were prized as though the white stuff were gold.

Pausing behind the bronze safe beside the doorway, she glanced back inside. Camillus was limping slightly as he paced the room, legacy of a Volscian spear thrust in his thigh, proof also of glory gained when very young.

‘You talk of war with Veii,’ said Lucius, ‘and yet this wretched truce is still on foot.’

The senator loomed closer to the door causing the girl to shrink away. ‘Wretched truce, indeed. Nearly twenty years has passed with those pampered Veientanes doling out corn to us while we let go the chance to cross the Tiber and seize their land. And all because peacemakers like your brother-in-law hold power.’

The tirade startled her. She was used to Tata teaching his tenets, together with grammar and dictation, with a gentle zeal. This man spoke not just the language of hatred but of passion for Rome.

‘I don’t disagree,’ said Tata. ‘I, too, would see Veii crushed, but our soldiers are already fighting the Volscians at Anxur and Verrugo while the Aequians stalk our borders. Resources are low, as is morale. Aemilius has good cause to counsel caution.’

Camillus scraped a chair along the floor to sit close by the plebeian, his body tensed upon the edge of the seat. ‘Haven’t you heard? Martial law has been proclaimed. Rome fights on so many warfronts it needs more generals. While the city is under military rule, four consular generals will be elected instead of two ordained consuls. Do you know what that means, my friend? Commoners will not be precluded from holding such a position. It is possible that a plebeian could lead a legion of Rome.’

Caecilia’s heart beat faster. How pleased Tata would be that his prayers had been answered and that his counsel was being sought.

Lucius did not reply. The senator’s startling news had caused him to cough. It was a racking cough that had persisted all winter;

hoarse and painful, deep and wheezy. ‘Your words bring hope to the people,’ he eventually said, gaining breath, ‘but it does not explain how our soldiers will be convinced to fight another war.’

The politician leaned forward and gripped the armrests of Tata’s chair. ‘Pay them a wage,’ he said loudly, as if Lucius needed greater volume to understand him. ‘Pay them a wage and then their spirits will rise enough to fight ten foes!’

Caecilia thought of the soldier whose valour had been rewarded by bondage. Thought, too, of all those Roman dead who called to be avenged.

And yet instead of approval, Tata fell silent, his hesitation mirrored in the tapping of his cane. ‘The idea has merit,’ he finally said. ‘But why come to me? It’s your patrician friends you should be approaching.’

‘I already have support from those who do not shrink from conflict. But we can do nothing if one of the people’s tribunes block the bill. All I ask is that you speak to your colleagues. Convince them that this would be in all our interests.’

Again Tata hesitated. ‘But will the treasury fund it?’

Camillus shifted in his seat. ‘No, there would have to be a tax. The people would have to be reasonable and pay their share.’

It was Tata’s turn to pace, rapping the bookshelves and the table with his cane to punctuate his words. ‘A tax? Don’t waste my time! If you promised booty or land as well it might be different, or if the patricians said they’d pay the lion’s share. I can hear the tribunes now, standing in the Forum, faces flushed with fervour. They’d choose some grizzled veteran in the crowd and make him display his scars. They’d shout, “Tell us, can this soldier afford to shed any more blood? Lose any more flesh? Does he have anything left to meet a tax to pay himself!”’

‘Ah, Lucius,’ said Camillus, smiling. ‘I’ve missed your orations.’

Tata eased back into his chair, rubbing his knuckles, his voice low. ‘You know I am no longer welcomed by the Assembly. The

people will surely claim I am still a patrician's puppet. There is no way they will listen to me.'

'You have more support than you imagine. All you need do is return to Rome and stand up for what you believe.' Camillus leaned over and touched the other's sleeve. 'You never acted dishonourably, only reasonably, unlike the current tribunes who take every chance to veto a levy of troops. Just one of them can hinder us proclaiming war. It is they who misuse their power whereas you always exercised good judgment.'

Tata continued to massage his crooked fingers. 'You mean I never opposed Aemilius and his friends. You mean I was "reasonable" enough not to veto laws that the patricians wanted passed.'

Camillus casually rearranged his robes. 'You are too harsh upon yourself,' he said. 'You've kept your promises to Aemilius, but has he? You funded his elections from your bulging purse yet here you are in this backwater, not one step closer to being consul than when you first met him. Since the censors have been consecrated to light the sacred flame for plebeians, there have been others given the opportunity to step into magisterial shoes. What has Aemilius actually done besides let you lie with his sister and father a half-caste child?'

In her hiding place, Caecilia flinched at hearing such truths, not wanting to believe them.

Her father's chair scraped along the floor. 'I think you should leave,' he said softly, firmly. 'What you say may be true but, for better or worse, I am tied to Aemilius. I will not break my word.'

Trembling, the girl chanced one more peek into the room. Camillus stood with open palms.

'Come, Lucius, don't be angry. We are both hawks, my friend, and well suited. And so I offer you this last chance. You can still attain your dreams if you are loyal to me. All I ask is that you campaign for a veteran's salary and war with Veii. In return I'll help you stand beside me as a consular general. Think of it, Lucius

Caecilius, imagine! You could be the first plebeian in the city to share supreme office in Rome.'

Holding her breath, Caecilia waited for Tata's reply, thinking he would be elated. Instead his voice sounded despairing.

'I am afraid you are too late,' he finally said as he stretched out his twisted feeble hands. 'Look at them! Look at them! Do you really think I could command either state or army? I have no more power to sway my people than I have strength to hold a sword.'



Lucius knew his daughter well. After Camillus had gone in a whirl of arrogance and disappointment, Tata called her to him, his words squeezed out in the gaps between his wheezing. 'How much did you overhear?'

Caecilia was shaking as much from the betrayal as from summoning courage to confront the man who owned her. 'Was I always the residue, not the essence of your vision, Tata? Am I just the tailings left after you had mined my mother's family for their value?'

Lucius slumped against the doorjamb in another fit of coughing. Despite her anger, Caecilia rushed to lead him to his chair.

'Cilla, you must never think that! Never! My dream was always to unite the classes, but there will never be concord unless the plebeians share power. And so my marriage to your mother served another purpose. It was supposed to help me walk upon the Honoured Way—step by step up the political ladder to the governorship of Rome.'

'Yes,' she said, voice trembling at defying him, 'through the currency of bronze weights and collusion!'

Tata leaned back, exhausted, face ashen, voice quiet. 'There was honour in my dream.'

‘But you heard Camillus! I am just a half-caste to them. While you see me as half of what could make Rome great my mother’s people see me as half of what would destroy it. The patricians will never let go their rule.’

‘I can’t believe that. You are the future.’

She sank to her knees beside him. ‘Is that all you see in me?’

Labouring for breath, Lucius put his hand upon her head and stroked her hair. ‘How can you doubt I love you? Haven’t you wondered why you are nearly eighteen and still unwed? I could have given you to a patrician groom by now but I could not bear to be without you.’

Bending down, he swept her plait from her neck to reveal a purplish blemish. ‘This birthmark is a sign of changing fortune, Cilla, ups and downs. The gods have signalled your life will not be easy. But you must believe me when I say that you and your children will make a difference to Rome, even if I have failed you.’



The cold of that winter’s day extended into weeks of ice and months of snow. Tata, lungs choked, hacking and hawking green phlegm, ribs cracked from coughing, retreated to his bed nursing his humiliation.

Caecilia tended him with devotion, forgiving his corruption and complicity, reluctant to forgo the touch of the only one who’d loved her. And the revelation had some benefit, for she at last understood why Tata hated Aemilius, and why, in turn, her mother hated her.

‘Stay with me,’ rasped Lucius, too weak to grasp his daughter’s hand. ‘Catch my last breath.’

When he died, Caecilia placed her mouth upon his still-warm lips, inhaling his soul, proud to possess part of him forever and glad that no brother existed to claim that right instead of her.

There was no need to hire mourners. Abandoned and alone, she grieved and sorrowed, rent her clothes, tore her hair.

His bier was plain, adorned by garlands. It bore the insignia of a people's tribune, the highest office he had held. Washed and anointed, he lay within his atrium, feet pointed towards the door. Outside, an evergreen bough was hung to announce to passers-by that death had already visited.

He had been cremated at night so that his daughter's farewell, spoken three times, was uttered through the choking taste and smell of burning flesh and cypress. The shock of watching him consumed upon his pyre raised the hairs on Caecilia's skin and summoned a night demon to her dreams. Every time she fell asleep, it sat upon her chest, weighing the same as a small dog, with snakes growing like horns from its head and wings sprouting from its back. Its eyes black slits in yellow.

And no matter how loud she screamed, nobody heard her cries.



It was spring when Caecilia left her home.

At the Liberalia festival people drank from the paltry vintage, singing and praying that the earth's new growth would burgeon instead of wither.

Before she left, the hearth fire was extinguished and not relit. There was no master to perform the rites to reignite it. The flames were quenched with sand, a silent smothering, leaving her with only the memory of a blackened hearthstone in a cheerless room.

It was March, the month of her birthday. The start of a new year.

It was also the month of Mars, the warrior god.

And so, as the girl began her journey, Rome prepared once again to go to war.