

THE SILVER LINE

by Heather Domin

CHAPTER ONE

Dardanus looked through the carriage window and thought that his father was right.

Manilus Atellus had spoken of Rome for as long as he could remember—the queen of cities, the home of the world, the source of their power—but to Dardanus it had never seemed like a real place. His sister and brother had been born there, before their mother's death and their father's remarriage, but Dardanus had never been east of the mountains separating Germania from Italia. Helvetia was his home and Aventicum his city; if Rome was his queen, she was a distant ruler, and Dardanus had never had much power. To him, growing up in the tentative township and riding through the forests of his mother's people to escape the silence of his father's rooms, Rome was a vague and unknowable place. Rome was never cold. Rome was never silent. Nothing of his city, the largest in both Germanias, could compare to the ocean of urbanity rising before his eyes.

He wondered how the horses could move in such a place. The paved streets teemed with traffic both human and animal, jostling through the patios of low-roofed shops or loitering in the shade of tenement blocks. The buildings were tall, at least four stories, crammed against each other in endless rows of laundry lines and curtained windows. Each of those rooms would be full of people, each apartment crowded to capacity with living, breathing Romans.

I am a Roman, Dardanus thought. I am the son of the procurator.

The carriage sped through a jumble of gateside buildings and escaped toward the hills, out of cramped alleys and up into quiet lanes of suburban villas. Here the roads were wide, devoid of scraps and manure, edged with cypress and cultivated flowers. Dardanus could sense the vastness left behind; he almost wished they could go back and see more, but after eight days on the road his exhaustion had overtaken his curiosity. The desire to reach his destination was enough to postpone his amazement—it was not, however, quite enough to still the queasy apprehension in his belly.

He let the curtain drop and sat back against the bench. In his lap lay the square of papyrus, red wax seal stamped with his father's signet ring. Dardanus ran his thumb over the grooves in the hardened wax. The letter was as stiff and crisp in his palm as it had been in his father's—a single sheet of paper and ink, heavy with the weight of his future.

Just be what I have taught you to be, and you cannot disappoint me.

The carriage turned, sharply enough to make him grab for balance, and pulled onto an inclined drive. From somewhere ahead a voice called out, and the driver answered the greeting. The carriage rolled onto a gravel path and swayed to a heavy stop. Dardanus slid the letter into his purse, then tugged down his cloak and ran a hand through his hair. He was brushing the dust and bits of crumb from his tunic when footsteps crunched outside the door and the cabin flooded with light.

"We're here, sir. Shall I take your bag?"

Dardanus cleared his throat. "No, thank you, I'll get it."

He climbed from the coach as gracefully as he could, grateful for the feel of solid earth beneath his sandals. The driver moved behind him, seeing to the horses; two footmen appeared and pulled his trunk from the rack. Dardanus stretched his cramped limbs, pressing his fists against the small of his back, and looked back down the path from which they had entered. The sun hung just behind the line of trees, striping the yard in gold and green to the columned entrance of the villa. A breeze stirred his cloak, the first cool air he had felt all day.

"Master Manilus?"

He turned to see a youngish man in a flax-colored tunic smiling at him from a round, pleasant face. "You are Manilus Dardanus?"

"Lucius Manilus Dardanus."

"Welcome to Rome, sir. My name is Tacitus; I am the head of General Cassius' household."

It was then Dardanus saw the bracelet around one upper arm, engraved with a mark of household. A slave. He looked again at the ruddy face and clipped hair, the clean tunic and oiled sandals. He thought of the downcast eyes and wool cassocks of his father's servants, the majority of whom could not even speak Latin. A freedman, then? He had never known a freedman who chose to remain in the service of his patron.

If Tacitus found the staring rude, he did not acknowledge it. "I hope your journey wasn't too taxing, sir. May we collect your things?"

"There's just the one trunk—it isn't heavy."

"A man of few possessions," Tacitus said, and he smiled. "He'll like that."

He tossed the driver a jingling pouch that made the man's eyes go wide, and with a crack of the whip and a clatter of hooves, the coach drove away as quickly as it had arrived. Dardanus watched it grow smaller down the hill. In the distance, Rome glittered with the evening's first torches. They shimmered like stars in the cooling shadows.

"The general asked to see you as soon as you arrived," Tacitus said. "The servants will see to your things if you would come with me."

"He wants to see me now?" Dardanus looked down at himself; his clothes were wrinkled and musty, his face and hair gritty with sweat. The hours on the road jangled in his bones.

"I assure you, sir, you are perfectly presentable. The general puts no mark on finery."

The first test, Dardanus thought. He smoothed down his tunic. "Of course."

He followed Tacitus through the vestibule and into the peristyle. It was the first of three atria, each as large as the courtyard in his father's home. The buildings of Aventicum were the same in structure but more enclosed, less airy, walled off against cold winters and encroaching feet. The procurator's townhouse was spacious and comfortable, but it was made of whitewashed concrete—this was a house of marble and limestone, brickwork inlaid with glass tile. The floor mosaics sparkled beneath his feet.

A flash of white caught his eye, and he turned his head. Through an archway stood a little garden room, draped in ivy and alive with spring flowers. The white object was a fountain of brilliant marble—the figure of a young woman, her body curved in dance, her face turned to the sky. Water and light spilled down her back in sheets of gold and white.

"She's beautiful," Dardanus said. "Is she a goddess?"

Tacitus smiled. "Most certainly."

They passed the room without slowing and turned down a long corridor. Tacitus led him into a large and mostly empty anteroom just as a young man emerged from the opposite doors carrying a tray and pitcher. The slave saw Tacitus and nodded.

"He's expecting you; please go in." He dipped his head to Dardanus. "Good afternoon, sir. Welcome to Villa Cassia."

The inner office was even larger but furnished comfortably, the walls crisscrossed with shelves of scrolls and codices. Maps and charts lay unrolled on tables, held flat by stone figurines. The last of the sunlight angled in through large windows on two sides, and the garden doors were open to let in the evening air. Near those doors, facing the entrance, was an enormous military desk carved from some dark-polished wood. Behind it, in an oddly mismatched wicker chair, sat General Marcus Cassius Valerian.

"My lord," Tacitus said, "The young gentleman has arrived."

Dardanus stood up straight and held out his father's letter. "Lucius Manilus Dardanus, sir."

The general put down his stylus and sat back in his chair. He took the letter from Dardanus' hand but did not open it.

Despite all the stories he had been told, Dardanus had never actually seen a likeness of General Cassius. Over time an image had formed in his mind, an imposing hulk of a man with fire in his eyes and battle lines carved on his face—the general's face bore its share of lines, but he looked not much taller

than Dardanus himself, and not particularly hulking. Nor was he dressed in full battle garb, spear strapped to his back and plumed helmet bristling on his head; he wore a plain tunic trimmed in senatorial purple, cloakless and bare-armed, not a weapon to be seen. Sun and scowl had weathered his face, but he had an unbroken nose and thick brown hair curling gray at the temples; a smallish mouth, with a jaw more pointed than square, gave him a look of perpetual concentration. His eyes had a greenish tint; they flashed no fire or lightning but took Dardanus in with a kind of bland registration. He looked somehow both older and younger than Dardanus had expected—a plain-faced man of forty instead of the glowering immortal of a boy's imagination.

"I knew your father," he said. "He was working at the Forum when I served there."

Served there. As one of the Princep's own bodyguards. That broke the spell; Dardanus remembered himself then, and the words he had nurtured in his head for so long.

"My father, Lucius Manilus Atellus, sends you his respect, my lord, and his appreciation for this invitation. It is an honor to meet you, sir."

"Is it?"

"Yes, sir. You honor me by offering this opportunity. My father sends a—"

"How old are you, boy?"

"I turned twenty at Lupercalia."

"Twenty? And you have yet to seek adoption? I was a Praetorian at your age."

Dardanus swallowed.

"My father—my father has been busy with his procuratorship and my brother's marriage. He preferred to wait until he—until a suitable situation arose."

"I see." The tone was inscrutable. "And you want me to teach you to be a soldier?"

"It would be a great privilege, sir. I've followed your campaigns for many years."

One eyebrow rose. "You knew my name in Aventicum?"

"My father told me of your victories against the Raeti and Vindelici. He said you were a true Roman commander."

"Did he also tell you that I am rich?"

He was being surmised; he could feel it in the even gaze. His careful poise slipped a notch. Just how well did this man know his father?

"No, sir. Well, yes, he told me the Princeps rewarded you for your bravery."

"Is that what he said." Amusement touched his voice; he rubbed his jaw with one knuckle and the hint of humor disappeared.

"I am very wealthy, young Manilus, and I have no heir. You know why your father chose me to solicit as your sponsor? You know what kinship in my house would bring?"

Of course he knew; since Saturnalia his father had spoken of little else. Dardanus was not the first to stand before this desk, nor the second, nor the third. Many young men had sought Cassius Valerian's sponsorship, and all of them had been refused. For the first time, Dardanus feared he would follow them before the Germanian dust had fallen from his traveling cloak. To face his father again so soon would be unthinkable.

Just be what I have taught you to be, and you cannot disappoint me.

"Yes, sir, I do. A place in your house would provide training no commission could give. That is what brings me here, sir. To learn from a man of honor."

There was a change in the general's eyes, a slight flicker in the opacity; a crack in the ice, or a spark of lightning. "You're not the first to say these things to me, and I think you know that. So tell me, boy—why should I feel any different for you?" He shifted against the back of his chair. "Why do you want to be a soldier?"

Dardanus licked his dry lips. Eight days and nights seemed to rush upon him all at once, and his knees locked to keep from swaying on his feet. Only one answer would form in his tired mind; if the truth was unseemly, so be it. Those eyes would brook no lie, even if he was capable of one. Standing there, finally, Dardanus found he could not deliver the flatteries his father had prepared for him. This was his only chance. These words must be his own.

"I want to fight for Rome, sir. I want to fight for my country and bring honor to my family, my captain, and my legion. I know I'm starting late, but I've trained for this life since the first day I could hold a sword. It's the only thing I have ever wanted. If you give me a chance to prove myself, I promise you I'll do all I can to be worthy of the association. I want to learn, General. From you."

There was silence for a long time. The general looked down at the letter in his hands; he snapped the seal of Manilus Atellus and unfolded the fine papyrus. Dardanus saw his father's handwriting through the thin paper, large and fastidious. The general read the letter slowly; then he read it again. He looked at Dardanus, then at the letter, and when he looked at Dardanus again the knife's edge in his eyes had sheathed a little.

"What I want," he said, "is my dinner."

He dropped the letter on the desk among the stacks and rubbed his jaw. "Tacitus, take the boy where he can wash and change his clothes. Have a room made up for him, and get him something to eat." To Dardanus he said, "You do your family credit, Manilus. Take some rest now; you've had a long journey. We'll talk again tomorrow."

It took all his effort, but Dardanus mastered his countenance.

"Thank you, sir," he said.