

Snug in my bed with exotic fabrics, I thought of the marvellous feast we had just had and of the music and games which had followed it. It had been the most extravagant, sumptuous feast of the year. From the woods beyond the villa, I heard the chilling cry of wolves howling as shadows gathered before the darkness. Their cry brought with it an unexpected, unsettling feeling of dread: something was not right, and I felt a familiar knot in my stomach. I closed my eyes, held my breath, and listened carefully to the darkness. Faintly, I heard, over the roaring rhythm of my own thudding heartbeat, a crackling, whispering sound. Opening my eyes, I sat up and looked around me for what was making the sound; from where was it coming? Then I saw it: fire! Immediately, I leapt from my bed.

“Cato! Wake up!” I called urgently to my brother, who was snoring quietly in his own bed. Sleepily, he opened his eyes, brushing his thick, wavy, dark hair from his face.

“What’s going on?” he mumbled, only half moving his lips in his doziness.

“Get up! There’s a fire in the kitchen! We have to get everybody out! I’ll get father; you wake the slaves.” Cato’s lively, hazel eyes opened wide in alarm and he sprang up, reaching for his sword. Cato, who was always quick to action, was renowned for both his skill with a sword and his cheeky sense of humour.

Everything happened so fast that I can barely recall the order of events. Cato must have woken the slaves, and my father must have made sure we all escaped the building. Now, as the fire roared through the villa, I cowered alone behind the statue of Venus. Where was Cato? Thick, black smoke filled the night air, and I struggled to stop myself from coughing: any sound could mean my discovery. Bright flames from the burning building lit the scene like a thousand torches. I could not close my eyes to block the horror; I could see everything. The barbarians’ swords sliced through the slaves; their blood soaked the ground as the barbarian’s leader bellowed instructions at his men, and the smell of death filled the air.

I turned my back to escape the gruesome scene. Suddenly, from the trees at the edge of the villa, I heard a hiss. I searched the treeline until I saw, peering from the blackness, the desperate face of my mother. “Quick!” she hissed, gesturing frantically for me to run to her. Just as I crouched, ready to sprint to safety in the trees, a huge figure blocked my path. His grey-streaked, black hair hung wildly to his shoulders. His face was bloodied and smeared with filth. His eyes gleamed with hate and anger. Snarling with rage, holding his deadly, razor-sharp sword aloft, he advanced towards me. The steel glistened at the hilt of the sword, but blood - evidence of the sword’s recent lethal action - stained the blade at its tip.

I had no time to react. My mother’s scream of fury pierced the air a split second before her spear pierced the barbarian’s neck. He fell to his knees, his eyes wide and disbelieving, a gurgling exclamation frozen in his throat. As he fell, I sprang up and ran, like lightning, towards the shelter of the trees and my mother’s arms.