

IN THE
SHADOW
OF
HEROES
NICHOLAS BOWLING



2 PALMER STREET, FROME, SOMERSET BA11 1DS
WWW.CHICKENHOUSEBOOKS.COM

Text © Nicholas Bowling 2019
Illustration © Erica Williams 2019

First published in Great Britain in 2019
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Nicholas Bowling has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design and interior design by Steve Wells
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made
from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

ISBN 978-1-911077-68-8
eISBN 978-1-911490-98-2

For PSF and MJP
magistris merentissimis

Also by Nicholas Bowling

Witchborn



PROLOGUS

The girl was like a visitor from the world below. Even if Silvanus had been able to stand, she still would have been a head taller than him; from where he lay, spread out on the couch and delirious with fever, she seemed inhumanly large, dark, insubstantial. Pluto himself come to take him away.

He motioned to his slave to bring him a little water, then dismissed him. With difficulty he propped himself up on one elbow and beckoned the girl into the room. She approached the couch in two giant strides, bringing with her a clean smell of dust and

hot air from outside. Healthy visitors only reminded Silvanus of how sick he was. His room was damp and fetid. The plaster on the walls seemed to sweat as much as he did.

‘You speak Latin?’ he asked. The girl stared at him and didn’t reply.

That was good. It meant she wouldn’t be able to read what she was delivering.

‘Greek?’ he said.

She nodded slowly.

‘You want to get out of this place, don’t you?’

Her face remained expressionless, as though weighing up whether this might be some sort of trap. Then she nodded again.

‘Well, then,’ said Silvanus. ‘I have a job for you.’

He hauled himself upright, his body sagging like a sack of grain. He waited for the throbbing in his temples to subside, and made his way to a strongbox in the corner of the room. Three times he stumbled and fell, three times the girl made no move to help him, but simply stood by the couch, watching with curiosity.

Silvanus opened the box and took out a scroll and a wax tablet. He put the scroll on the desk and handed the tablet to the girl.

‘I’ve watched you,’ he said. ‘With the other slaves. You seem . . .’ He groped for the word. ‘Resilient.’

Still she said nothing.

‘I want you to look after this tablet with the same vigour that you look after yourself. Do you understand? Its contents are very important. More important than I can tell you.’

She was starting to look bored now.

‘*Listen.*’ Silvanus tried to shake her by the arm, but found himself clutching on to her to stop himself from falling. He coughed, tasting blood in the back of his mouth. ‘Listen to me. You must take this to a man in Rome. His name is written inside. Go to the harbour and get a boat to Italy. As quickly as possible. By any means possible. No one else is to read it.’

His slave trotted back into the room behind them both, holding a circle of iron in his hands.

‘You’ll have to wear this, I’m afraid. I can’t afford to have the message going astray.’

Silvanus took the collar from the boy and fumbled with the clasp. He fitted it around the girl’s neck. A wooden tag hung by a chain on to her chest, which read, in Latin:

I BELONG TO GAIUS DOMITIUS
TULLUS, SENATOR. IF YOU FIND ME,
RETURN ME TO MY MASTER AT ROME.

Silvanus could see that the collar was too tight around the girl’s muscular neck, and her brow

twitched with discomfort.

‘Go,’ he said. ‘Don’t rest. The man in Rome will look after you. I promise.’

He nodded to his slave, who led her out of the room, taking three steps for every one of hers. She never said a thing, and she never looked back.

Silvanus watched them go and wondered, through the fog of his sickness, if he was making a terrible mistake. Perhaps, he thought, it would be better if all he knew went with him to his grave.

He swayed a little on his feet. He rolled up the edge of his toga and looked at the two tiny puncture wounds on his thigh. The flesh around them had gone a sickening shade of yellow, threaded through with dark purple veins. No doctor in all of Athens had been able to do anything for him. Now he was resigned to prayer, and he very much doubted the gods wanted to listen to him.

Behind him, the scroll that he had taken from his strongbox was still lying on the writing desk. He picked it up and held it for a moment, enjoying its weight, tracing his finger around the bosses at the top and bottom.

Then he took the oil lamp from the tabletop, held it to the corner of the scroll, and set fire to it. He dropped it on to the tiles, and watched the tightly rolled papyrus burn and blacken and flutter like a

crow's feathers. His eyes watered from the smoke. He may have been crying, though he hardly had the energy for it. Either way, it was done. Now it was all down to the girl.

Outside, he could hear the streets of Athens singing and clattering with life. Silvanus smiled. He'd hated the noise when he'd arrived, strange men hollering in strange accents. Now, on the brink of death, it sounded like music.

He crushed the remains on the scroll with his heel. Then he stumbled back to the couch, pulled the coverlet over his body, and waited for night.