



M
THE
MENTORIS
PROJECT

SAVING THE REPUBLIC

A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF
MARCUS CICERO

Eric Martin

Chapter One

It was a warm day, particularly for winter. After 50-some years in the city, Cicero could not remember a December morning hotter than this. He'd always enjoyed winters in Rome because, while sunny, they were typically crisp and refreshing. But this day was different—more like early summer than mid-winter. But for all the heat, Cicero couldn't help but notice what a beautiful day it was. A day that invited all out into the world, one in which opportunities seemed endless. Funny, he thought, that fate would present him with a day of so much promise on what would surely be his last.

The house bustled, servants and family members darting around, arms stacked with all manner of household items. On a normal day, this would not be allowed. Marcus Tullius Cicero was an introspective man and interruption worked wholly against his endeavors. Anyone who spent regular time in his home knew this and respected his need for calm. But today was not a normal day.

Cicero usually rose before his family. He liked walking the city before the citizens and merchants really got going. Walking let his mind breathe and wander. He had his best thoughts

while walking. Most if not all of his written works were filled with thoughts he had, not at his desk, but while on his feet, promenading through his beloved Rome. Looking around his buzzing home on this chaotic morning, he half-considered heading out for a stroll. Surely the streets could not be as busy as his hallways. How was a man to think amidst such chaos? On a normal day, he would just not allow this. But, he thought, today is not normal.

“Father, please hurry,” Tullia said.

Cicero turned to see his daughter and eldest child, Tullia, approaching, arms piled with linens and assorted valuables.

Cicero smiled. “I am,” he said.

Tullia made a crooked face and continued on. Her father may be lying to her, but how was one to argue with the great Marcus Tullius Cicero, the greatest confuter of his day? Or, perhaps of any day, she thought as she went back to emptying the villa.

As Tullia moved on with her load, Cicero continued through his home. Had it always been this large? Somehow it seemed bigger today, and more beautiful too. Frescoes covered the walls and there were intricate tile patterns across the floor, with busts and statues scattered throughout. He knew all these items existed. He saw them every day. But today, he was actually noticing it all. It really was quite stunning. Each piece represented hours, days, months, and maybe even years of someone’s life. The care and craftsmanship put into everything around him gave him pause. He hadn’t enjoyed the beauty of it all nearly enough. For the first time this morning, he felt emotional.

Through the tumult of recent times Cicero had remained stoic. An uncommonly pragmatic man, he always faced problems with zeal, each quandary an opportunity to learn that

which he hadn't already known. There was no place for emotion in problem solving, and fighting to preserve the Republic was just another problem he was trying to solve. What was good for the Republic was good for him. It was simple logic — the same kind of simple logic that filled his mind in most waking hours. But, he thought, maybe he had been too intent on carrying out his tasks to really appreciate the world around him. He'd been too focused on each step along the path to look up and appreciate his surroundings.

Cicero ran his fingers along the fresco of Rome stretching over the expansive atrium wall. The fresco, sprawling and crafted with intricate detail, presented the whole of the city as seen from the Palantine Hill. Amazing, he thought, that one could recreate something like this from memory. How intimidating a canvas must this wall have been! How could one work up the nerve to even start such an endeavor? Running his hand over the fresco and tile inlays, Cicero slowed, noticing the individual brush strokes. All big things start small and build, stroke by stroke, tile by tile.

As taken as Cicero was with the newly appreciated art of his every day life, he began to worry. Each piece before him was crafted by a citizen of Rome and stood before him as evidence of a person's life. In all his work fighting for the Republic and its people, maybe he had failed to properly admire them and all the beauty they had created. While he fought for the whole, did he ignore the parts that made it up and made it worth fighting for in the first place?

With a wave of melancholia washing over him, Cicero felt the sudden need to get away from the madness swirling around in the house. Ducking into the hallway, he walked toward his library. Surely sanctuary could be found there. Though his staff

was careful to keep a staid atmosphere in the home, they were doubly careful to ensure that no worldly bother breached the walls of the library. On an ordinary day, Cicero could enter the room and leave the rest of the world behind, but he worried that such might not be possible today. Walking into the library, Cicero paused, shocked and relieved to find the room both empty and silent. By this measure, at least, this day was mercifully ordinary.

Cicero peered around at the shelves of scrolls filling all the space but a for a small outcropping occupied by his desk. Surrounding him was knowledge from as much world as he'd known to exist. He'd gathered many of the scrolls himself—writings from Greece, Egypt, and Asia. They represent not just his travels and experiences but the collective wisdom that informed the man he came to be.

There were so many scroll rolls! When did his collection grow to this prodigious size? Just like he took for granted the artistic craftsmanship all around his home, Cicero was struck that he never really stepped back and looked on his collection as a whole like this. But this is different, he thought. He may not have taken the pleasure he could have at the art all around him, but he had certainly extracted every piece of knowledge and pleasure from his scrolls. In fact, he didn't even need the scrolls anymore—numerous though they were, he knew them inside and out. Each had been read to the exhaustion of its ideas. It was a comforting thought and one that assuaged the guilt he'd felt for taking his surroundings for granted. There was too much in the world to take in everything. He may have missed some things, but he had taken in much.

Moving through the library, Cicero ran a hand along shelves, his fingers slipping along the edges of the many rolls.

He stopped as he got to his own works, again struck by their number. He stepped back. He'd never really admired the breadth of his work because he had always so busy working on his next piece that he had never really stepped back to look on his work as a body. There were so many rolls—so many words and ideas. How had he ever had the time? He smiled as the answer came to him: Piece by piece and tile by tile.

Stepping outside, Cicero looked out over all of Rome. Perched high upon the Palatine hill, there wasn't a part of the city he could not see. Behind him, two servants carried his desk.

"Over here," Cicero said, motioning the men toward him, "where I can get the best view."

The two servants situated the desk; another set a stack of papyrus, ink well, and quills upon it. Cicero saw the anxious servants fidget.

"I'm sorry. You must all be in a terrible fright," Cicero said. "Head home to your families. I release you from your service." The servants passed confused looks between themselves. "It's fine," Cicero said. "And I'm sorry I can no longer offer you work, but look to the house maiden. She has payment for you." The servants nodded and hurried away.

Cicero sat at his desk, peering out onto the great city. It felt fresh and new, stirring feelings of his first days in the city as a child. He had not liked Rome at first, but that changed with time and experience. Finally feeling at peace, Cicero organized the papyrus and dipped his quill. He began to write—

"Father," a perplexed Tullia said from the door. "What are you doing?"

"Thought I'd get some writing done," Cicero said.

“What? No,” Tullia exclaimed. “They’re coming to kill you.”

Cicero considered her remark, then lifted his pen. “Then I suppose I haven’t time to waste.”

Chapter Two

Perched at the window of his parents' apartment, a young Cicero looked out on the endless rows of buildings before him. With their building high upon a berm, the third-floor window offered a vantage point well beyond the many buildings around them. Despite that, the city sprawled and stretched beyond his perspective so even this elevated look was just a glimpse of the metropolis.

Before moving to Rome, Cicero had read everything he could about the great city. His family had only lived sixty miles from the city, but even within such close proximity to the cultural hub, the scroll rolls available were limited. Nothing like he had access to now. Ambivalent though he was about the move, Cicero couldn't help but find excitement in having access to more scrolls and writings than he could read in ten lifetimes.

In his many readings on Rome, Cicero had come across countless descriptions of the city, but in looking on it himself, he realized that none of them did it justice. How could they? The authors were trying to describe something that words struggled to illustrate. The city was massive—nearly one million people, he had read. Cicero didn't know there were that

many people on Earth. Perhaps he knew in the abstract, but to fathom such a number was impossible. And why would they all want to live together?

Cicero had enjoyed living in Arpino. Having access to all the scroll rolls in the capital was great, but Arpino with its small population had a quiet, relaxed atmosphere that allowed a mind to breathe—nothing like the constant swirl of dense human occupation in Rome. Maybe they could move back to Arpino and have scrolls sent to them. That would work. It would be better. His family had moved to Rome for his education, but they could move back and he could teach himself with the scrolls from Rome. It was a good plan, but Cicero knew the answer would be the same as it always was: We're here for your schooling, so you have to go to school. Unfortunately for Cicero, school is what he liked least about Rome.

"You're not dressed," Cicero's mother, Helvia, said from the doorway.

Cicero turned from the window. "Maybe I shouldn't go," Cicero said. "You know, we can have scrolls sent to us anywhere. I can just read them and teach—"

Helvia tossed Cicero's school clothes at him. "You're going to school no matter what," she said. "Keep stalling and you'll just go without breakfast." Helvia cocked her brow and stared at Cicero a moment before leaving.

Cicero sighed and started dressing. He's been through this enough to know that his mother always won.

Cicero wiped sweat from his forehead as he peered up at the sun overhead. It was another hot summer day; the days are always hot in Rome, Cicero thought, as he walked down an alley-

way toward the thoroughfare. The problem was just too many buildings, which stifled the breeze and made the city bake in the sun. Arpino had fewer buildings and those buildings were far apart, so even on hot days, a gentle breeze could glide through. But, as annoying as the heat was, for Cicero the real problem was that there were just too many people.

The countless scrolls Cicero had read prior to getting to the city had mostly prepared him for what life in Rome would be like, but nothing came close to preparing him for all the people. A million people living on top of each other! How did they all manage? And why would they even want to?

During the first of his days in the city, Cicero's mother put him right out on the streets and made him walk to school. He had to learn how to get around the city some time, she said, as she booted him from the comfortable confines of their home. And learn he did. First, he learned not to walk by the brothels and drink houses. Drunks always spilled out of those places and there was no telling what a person so out of control could do. Better to go the long way around.

The long way, though it added a good deal of distance, was free of the dark, narrow alleyways that plagued the city. Rome had grown organically, with little planning, so it was a maze of pathways that all look alike and never seemed to lead where you thought they would. Taking the long way, however, kept Cicero on wide thoroughfares big enough for shopkeepers to bring through stout oxen, yoked at the head of supply carts. Unfortunately, the long way also included a trip through the Aventine, a plebian neighborhood.

The people of the Aventine seemed fine enough to Cicero. He liked their frank, hardworking nature; it reminded him of home. Their kids, however, scared him. They were rough and

tumble and confident in the ways of the city that he was not. Plus, most of them didn't go to school, so there was little he had in common with them. On his first trips through the neighborhood, the boys—and even some of the girls—had given Cicero a hard time, but nothing more than some name-calling and jeers about being a rich boy and a dandy. Cicero tried to explain to them that he wasn't rich. His parents had some money from their farmland in Arpino, which gave them a decent middle-class life, so he could imagine how he seemed wealthy to impoverished plebeian children, but he was certainly no patrician. Such a distinction, however, was lost on the plebe kids, so Cicero learned to keep his head down and his mouth shut as he walked through their neighborhood. Even so, he wished them no ill will; he just wanted to get by them as fast as possible.

Despite having finally figured out how to navigate through the Aventine without drawing too much attention from these kids, the day Cicero discovered his current route to class was bittersweet. It had taken over a week of trial and error to discover this path through the madness of the city. The route wasn't perfect and Cicero certainly would have preferred to avoid the plebe kids, but he was certain it was the swiftest, safest route.

The city was still intimidating, but he had made his way through it on his own and felt a little less overwhelmed by it all. It was at this moment, walking around feeling confident and proud of his ability to get around the city that he realized he had been too overwhelmed by everything to appreciate the multi-dimensional aspects of walking through Rome. He had been so concerned about moving front, back, left or right that he hadn't properly factored in the difficulties that could occur at any time.

As he neared the area of the incident, Cicero remembered the awful moments as clearly as if they had just happened, and

he suspected that he would for the rest of his life. He had begun the day with the confident step of a young man who knew his way, one who had been thrust into the city and who had found the optimal route to class. But as Cicero walked now, free of concern for the first time since moving to Rome, he wasn't thinking of where he was going. The sound of his foot plopping into the wet mess was the first thing that struck him. Quickly after, it was the smell, then the oozing wetness filling his sandals and washing around his feet...he had stepped in a puddle of human waste, no doubt from the dreadful practice Romans had of tossing their chamber pots out into the street. He had neglected to remember this morning ritual of the typical Roman and now his foot and leg were soiled. But in a few seconds, this would be the least of his worries.

Looking back now, Cicero recalled that he knew what was coming next. He hadn't seen the woman reach out from the third floor apartment overhead. Nor had he heard the scrape of her chamber pot against the wood of her window well. Instead, his conclusion came as a mix of knowledge that the waste on his foot had come from above mixed with the gut-wrenching intuition that fate was about to punish his prior overconfidence.

In Arpino, people empty their chamber pots into unpopulated areas. They had land all around, so stepping outside to toss the waste off a hillside was no ordeal. Cicero knew that such was not the case in Rome, but he had not considered that someone might be on the other end of such an act. When Cicero realized what he had stepped in, he finally got around to considering how the waste got there in the first place. It took just a moment to realize the answer but by that time it was already too late.

The contents of the chamber pot came all at once. If disgust had not overcome his ability to evaluate the situation in total,

Cicero would have been amazed that nearly all the matter struck him alone, making its way to the ground as it dripped from his soaked robes. He threw up and cried and threw up again. But when nobody came to his aid, he turned and made his way back home, taking the short route this time. Even a drunkard wouldn't bother someone covered in the mess he was covered in.

Today, Cicero knew far more about the city and while he moved about confidently, he also knew to move with caution. Since that dreadful day, he had managed to avoid a similar fate, though he had seen many others who had not been so lucky. He learned from his mistake and vowed daily never to repeat it. However, when considering what he was marching toward at school, Cicero thought briefly that maybe being doused by a chamber pot and getting to go home might be a better fate.

Cicero gripped his hands together, hoping it might keep the boys from seeing them shake. Surrounding him stood four boys that looked a few years older, but that was just because Cicero was so small for his age. At the head of the boys stood Fabius, tall and strapping, with a lightly tanned face and dark hair over broad shoulders. The de facto leader of the group, Fabius had learned early on how to use his size to intimidate smaller boys. But for all Fabius's size, Cicero couldn't help but notice his soft, uncalloused hands. Cicero's hands were no different, but for a boy who presented himself as a physical threat, the patrician Fabius had likely done little physical labor in his life. Nonetheless, Cicero cowered before him. Fabius may have been softer than he appeared at first blush, but Cicero was still the small, weak boy he had always been.

When he was born, Cicero's parents Helvia and Tullius were told he would likely not live out the week. The doctors said they would do what they could, but he was far too small, sickly, and weak to survive. So tortured and fraught with sickness was Helvia's pregnancy that her midwife thought she would miscarry well before term. Instead, on January 3, 106 B.C. Marcus Tullius Cicero was born and a week later he was still alive.

Despite a penchant for defying predictions of his death, Cicero continued to receive such prognoses throughout his early childhood. Doctors came through Arpino, did what they could for his weak immune system, and told his parents that their son would likely die before his next birthday. But birthdays kept passing and Cicero kept defying the predictions of his doctors. Nonetheless, he was sick most of the time.

As the other kids in the village grew strong and robust, Cicero remained small and weak. His mind, however, was crisp. Before his third birthday he was reading and, when well enough, he sat in on classes with the teenage students by the time he was six.

As smart as Cicero was, various maladies kept him out of school for irregular but inevitable intervals. If a sickness passed through the classroom, Cicero was sure to get it and none would have a more acute case than him. Shortly after his eighth birthday, Cicero fell gravely ill. As his condition worsened, his parents had to face the reality that this would be the time he finally succumbed to the predictions. Tullius and Helvia sat with Cicero through the night, keeping vigil for fear that they might miss the moment that would be his last. But the moment never came. Instead, Cicero awoke the next morning and each morning thereafter. He recovered from the illness and grew stronger and healthier with each day, and never again would he fall so gravely ill.

After his sickness Cicero returned to school and with his newfound vigor, his mind grew even sharper. In just his tenth year of life, no tutor in Arpino had the knowledge or ability to teach much less to keep up with young Cicero. Seeing his special abilities, Tullius and Hellvia sold most of their farmland and moved to Rome to get Cicero the best instruction available.

Despite his hard-earned health, Cicero was still small for his age and, much to his chagrin, even for ages much younger than his own. In the right situation, a small eleven-year-old such as himself might be able to squeak by with minimal bullying, but, as Cicero looked around at the large patrician boys that surrounded him, he knew this was not such a situation.

“You don’t have the right answer now, do you, know-it-all?” Fabius barked at Cicero. As if being small and not of patrician birth were not enough to draw the scorn of the other boys, Cicero was hated in his class because he was so much smarter than everyone else. In a week he was scheduled to move up into classes with much older boys. Cicero would have been excited to get out of his current situation, but he knew that studying with even older kids was not going to make it any better. But none of that mattered, because his current bullies were already surrounding him.

“Where’s the money?” one of the other boys snarled.

“I don’t have any money,” Cicero said.

“Then you better bring some tomorrow,” Fabius said, jangling his coin purse. “I’m starting to get a little low.”

“But your families have far more money than mine,” Cicero said, at which

Fabius smacked Cicero in the face. Cicero recoiled and the other boys laughed.

“Just bring the money or I’ll hit you again,” Fabius said as he and his cohorts walked off, chortling.

Cicero held his eye and sulked, as Fabius wrung out his hand, trying to hide the pain he felt from inflicting the blow.

As Helvia prepared dinner, Cicero slipped in through the front door. Their apartment was spacious and well lit. It was not as nice and airy as their house in Arpino, but by non-patrician standards, it was very nice for Rome. Sneaking through, Cicero knew the loose floorboards to avoid, but his efforts were nothing compared to his mother’s heightened hearing.

“Is that you, Cicero?” Helvia asked from the other room.

“Yes, Mother,” Cicero responded.

“Get changed and come help with dinner,” Helvia said.

“Yes, Mother,” Cicero said, as he ducked not into his room, but that of his parents. Skulking through, he took even greater care not to step on a creaky board, as he moved to the ledge where his mother kept her coin purse.

Getting to the far end of the room, Cicero looked back to make sure his mother was nowhere to be seen. Satisfied she wasn’t, he snatched the purse and began pilfering—

“So, you’re a thief now?”

Cicero spun around, dropping the coin purse and spilling its contents across the ground, some of which rolled to the feet of his stern-faced mother.

“I was just—”

“Stealing. I saw,” Helvia said. “You know, I just can’t believe you would—” Helvia spied Cicero’s blackening eye. “What happened?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing,” Cicero said, as he snatched up coins from the ground. “I was just taking the money to buy a toy.”

Helvia cocked an eyebrow. “I might have believed you if you had said a scroll roll. Come here, let me look at that eye.” Helvia pulled Cicero to the window, examining his eye in the light. “You got in a fight?” Helvia asked.

“No,” Cicero said.

“Then explain this black eye,” Helvia insisted.

Cicero hedged. “Well,” he said, “I think it only counts as a fight if you fight back.”

“Then why didn’t you fight back?” Helvia asked.

“Because he’s bigger than me,” Cicero said.

Helvia considered. “And the money is for him?”

Cicero nodded, ashamed. “He said he won’t beat me up if I give it to him.”

“And you believe him?” Helvia pressed.

Cicero hadn’t considered whether or not to believe Fabius. “I don’t know. I hate it here. I want to leave. I want to go back to Arpino,” Cicero said, hanging his head.

Helvia put a finger to Cicero’s chin, tilting his face to look at her. “Come on,” she said. “I want to show you something.”

Grasping a handful of her dress in her hand, Helvia cinched the fabric up to keep it from dragging along the ground as she marched up Janiculum Hill. Cicero scurried behind, doing his best to keep up as the dust and weeds induced sporadic sneezing and coughing fits. He wanted to ask how much farther they needed to walk, but he learned long ago that if his mother thought he was complaining she’d only make the task more difficult.

Even though he wasn't enjoying the trek, Cicero valued the time with his mother. She was tough on him, but never mean. She worried about him and wanted to make sure that he grew into a strong and capable man. He knew she only ever did what was best for him, which made Cicero feel all the more guilty for not being strong.

"I think that's good," Helvia said, turning to look at Cicero. "Let's sit down."

Out of breath, Cicero happily obliged. Turning to take a seat on the hillside, Cicero paused, realizing just how high up they'd trekked, as the widest view of the city he'd ever seen stared back on him.

"What do you see?" Helvia asked.

"I see Rome," Cicero responded.

"What else?" Helvia pressed.

Cicero looked on the city. It was actually quite beautiful from this distance, even more so with the soft glow of the evening sun hanging over it. It was almost enough to make him regret his negative feelings about the place. Almost.

Cicero focused, trying to figure out what his mother wanted to hear.

"I see buildings."

"What kinds?"

"Lots of kinds."

"What do you see most of?"

Cicero considered a moment. "Homes."

"Who lives in those homes?"

"People. Romans."

"Just like you."

"I'm not a Roman."

“You may have grown up in a province and not in the city,” Helvia said, “but you are a citizen of Rome, same as each and every person in this city.”

“But I’m not like everyone else here,” Cicero retorted.

“No,” Helvia said, “And they aren’t like each other. Rome isn’t a place, Son. It is the sum of its people: some are smart; some are not. Some are strong; some are weak. Some were born here; some were not. But we all work together to be Rome. And that means something.”

Cicero looked on the city again, trying to digest his mother’s words.

“Do you remember when you were sick?” Helvia asked. “You couldn’t get out of bed, but the doctors came to see you. They worked to heal you. That is Rome.”

“I don’t understand,” Cicero said.

“I wake up every morning grateful to be Roman,” Helvia said, brushing back her son’s hair. “Because Rome saved your life. Rome is a Republic. We have no king. The people govern themselves by electing leaders. And because of that, we all live together as one, working to make Rome great, and because of that, we have the time and resources to protect and preserve everyone. In Gaul or Germania, only the strong of body would survive. They are a separate, feuding people and because of that, they have to work harder to just survive. In Rome, the weakest of body can survive and bring value to the world in their own way.”

“So, maybe I can be Consul of Rome some day?” Cicero asked.

“Perhaps,” Helvia said. “We moved to Rome because your mind is strong, but it needs to be with other strong minds to reach its potential. And because we, and you, owe it to Rome to give back to the Republic and keep it great for all those who

come after you. People who wouldn't have had a chance if not for the wisdom and resources of the Romans."

"Why are you telling me this?" Cicero asked.

"Because you need to learn to live in this world," Helvia said. "You owe it to yourself and you owe it to the Republic that you fulfill your abilities and you can't do that by running from bullies."

"But they're stronger than me," Cicero said.

"And there will always be men who are physically stronger than you," Helvia said, "But you are a man of Rome. You don't need the strongest body to be the strongest man."

Walking back, Cicero thought about his mother's words and he thought about the city. Perhaps being overwhelmed by all the people constantly swirling around caused him to be rash in his assessment of Rome. Maybe his mother was smarter in her assessment. It was the people of Rome who made Rome Rome. It may be difficult dealing with so many different kinds of people all in one place, but maybe that was the key to its greatness. Rome gave all manner of people a chance to add to the whole. How could any nation compete with such a wide and diverse talent pool?

Finally returning home, Cicero had dinner with his parents, but retired early to his room to read. However, as much as he wanted to read, his mind wandered, pondering the coming events at school tomorrow and how he would deal with the bullies. Realizing he'd never be able to focus enough to read it, Cicero set down his scroll and snuffed out the candle. He rolled over and settled in, ready to sleep. Instead he tossed and turned, a restless mind in a restless bed.



The next morning Cicero left early, sneaking out while his mother prepared breakfast. This meant leaving behind his lunch, but that didn't bother him much because his nerves had rendered inert any normal hunger pangs he might have had that day.

Walking to class, Cicero took his normal route. His mind was elsewhere, but he remained aware of his surroundings, careful to dodge any murky puddles as he made his way through the area where the poor plebian boys always gave him a hard time.

Cicero took his seat in class and tried to go about his business. Perhaps, he thought, if he ignored the bullies, maybe they would forget about him too. When the first pebble struck the back of his head, Cicero knew he would not be so lucky.

The usual jeers and pestering came at Cicero from Fabius and his cohorts throughout the day. Cicero endured and did his best to pretend not to notice them. Maybe if he kept a stiff upper lip they'd lose interest and leave him alone, he thought. Class ended and Fabius approached, jangling his coin purse, and Cicero knew he would have to deal with the situation.

"Where's my money, Sissy-ro?" Fabius mocked.

"I didn't bring it," Cicero said, packing his satchel.

"What do you mean you didn't bring it?" Fabius said.

"I—I just didn't." Cicero got up and hurried for the door. Perhaps, if he just kept on, they'd leave him alone. Instead, the bullies followed.

"So, you want me to punch you then?" Fabius said, hovering over Cicero as they stepped out into the street.

"No," Cicero said walking as fast as he could.

Fabius grabbed Cicero from behind, pressing him up against a rock wall. "I told you to bring me money," Fabius said.

"But we're all Romans. We shouldn't fight like this," Cicero said.

Fabius laughed. "You're no Roman, Sissy-ro. You're a provincial. I am a Roman. All my friends are Romans. You are not a Roman," Fabius said, shooting his fist into Cicero's gut. Cicero lowered onto one knee, cringing in pain, as Fabius loomed over him. "You want another?"

"No, I have money at home. I can give it to you," Cicero said, crawling to his feet and starting his march home. Fabius and his friends traded nods, then followed closely behind him.

Cicero tried to talk the boys up as they walked. Perhaps, if he kept talking, they'd like him and he wouldn't need to do this. But Fabius only grew bolder in his mocking.

Through the roads and alleyways, Cicero led the boys. The farther they went, the more Cicero sensed the unease within the bigger boys. They hadn't ventured into an area like this before, he supposed. Somehow, they considered themselves more Roman than him, but they'd never spent any time with anyone other than the upper class of the city. Here he was, a weak, sickly little boy moving without concern through the plebian area while the much larger, richer boys grew more concerned with each block.

Cicero slowed and looked to Fabius. Perhaps he could reason with them now that they had seen how confident he was ambling through the city. "Are you uncomfortable in this area? Do you not want to go further?" Cicero asked.

Fabius looked around nervously, but stiffened up, trying to hide his nerves. "I'm not scared, Sissy-ro," Fabius said, shoving Cicero to the ground.

“Very well,” Cicero said, standing and dusting himself off as he headed down the next alley. Fabius and the other bullies followed, but stopped short as two teenage boys stepped behind them, blocking off the entrance. Cicero continued to the other side, as two more tough boys blocked the exit. Cicero slowed, approaching Aelius, the largest of the ruffians.

“This ’em?” Aelius asked Cicero in thick street accent.

“Yes,” Cicero said. “The big one carries a coin purse.”

As Fabius’s jaw dropped, Cicero stepped past the big plebian boys, ready to continue his walk home.

“Don’t you want a cut of the money?” Aelius asked Cicero.

“No. You take it,” Cicero said. “Maybe you can do me another favor some time.”

Aelius nodded, “Yeah, all right.”

As Cicero walked off, Aelius and the plebian boys approached Fabius and his friends. Cicero heard Aelius say, “So, you like to pick on my friend, do you?” Cicero only smiled.

Once home, Cicero deposited his satchel on the table and started setting the table. Helvia approached from the kitchen. “How was your day? Better?” Helvia asked.

Cicero smiled. “Yes, I made some new friends.”