For The Senate or The People
Dear Romans,

Cicero has been called many things, from greatest lawyer in Rome to most cunning politician in the senate, and certainly I cannot deny his oratory prowess when it is powerful enough to put an end to my life. All week as I heard his speeches I have been plagued with anger and frustration the likes of which most of you will never know. But today, as I learned of the final vote on the issue of my life, rolled over me a sense of detachment that has lent courage and peace to my heart.

I am glad it did because I have been informed you have now reached the metelli villa, which gives me very little time for bitterness. Since you will not give me a trial, I bid you to read this letter carefully, for if I deserve to die, my opponent deserves to be damned to Tartarus.

Yesterday, Cicero told the senate that I was worse than any adulterer, robber, patricide, gladiator, or prostitute. That is rather an exaggeration, when there is only so much time in the day for me to commit adultery, robbery and patricide while also maintaining a successful career as a prostitute. No, I have done something much worse to Cicero and the rest of the aristocrats.

The day before, Cicero told the senate that I had committed incest with my daughter and then killed her. A gruesome and baseless accusation, and I wonder at the mind of a man who could even think of committing such a crime.

These insults are among the mildest I have had thrown at me in the past week.

It all started of course when half of the most powerful senators received anonymous letters, telling them of a plot to kill them and assail Rome with riots. Guess who Cicero accused of organising this plot? None other than yours truly.

But you may be thinking by now, why should you believe me, and not your own Consul? After all, why would Cicero baselessly accuse a lowly merchant of such crimes? There are two reasons: first, I am rich. I do not hide it, my products sell well, my ships have been blessed with smooth sailing, I have made a small fortune for myself. A fortune which will go straight into Rome’s coffers once I am dead.

But that is not enough to have someone launch such serious accusations, especially when many in the senate are far richer than I am. The second reason is the real crux of the issue, and what makes me a far more despicable man for the senate than my gold: I am popular. You will excuse my arrogance I hope, I am after all a dying man, and I doubt many will sing my praise at my
funeral pyre. In the last two years, I have aimed to share some of my luck with the people of Rome, through the grain I distribute every week, to the land I rent for free and the debts I cancel. I have known what it is to be poor in Rome, and I know it is not the result of a flaw of character or of bad choices. Many will find hypocrisy in the wealth I do keep for myself, but I have always thought the senate made a good job of getting richer every year, collecting the taxes of our expanding provinces, yet the slums remain as poor as they always have been. In any case, it should have been no surprise when as a result, you grew to like me more than our senators. It scared them too, I think, that I showed you life could be different. That wealth did not have to be hoarded and preserved, but could be shared.

And so, our dear Cicero devised a plan that would get rid of me, while regaining the people’s good favours. Since everyone loves a hero, he decided to save Rome from impending doom, by creating impending doom from thin air, with me at the centre of it. Was it not convenient that an anonymous letter warned the senators of a plot menacing them? Was it not convenient, that informants cropped up telling everyone that I had been contacting the Etrurians to organise a popular uprising? Was it not convenient, that when I visited Cicero’s heavily guarded villa alone to ask for an explanation, I allegedly tried to kill him?

I think many of you see how thin the evidence against me is when scrutinised in the slightest, and certainly at first it seemed that these claims would fall flat, and I would suffer only the embarrassment of being accused of most of the wrongs of the world. My social life would have suffered from it certainly, but I could have lived with that. In any case, surely the people, being on my side, would not take the senate’s word against mine. Alas, this is where Cicero’s true cunning shows, because on the last day of his campaign against me, he used the only true accusation he had, and the most damning.

This morning, Cicero told the senate and the people that I am not a Roman citizen.

It is true. I will not bore you with bureaucratic details, but through a subtle manipulation of the public records, and a few well-placed bribes, my past life was hidden, and I was reborn a Roman.

The fact my citizenship was fake did not stop me from paying my taxes for the last ten years, from completing my military service before that. It did not prevent you from buying my products, nor did it prevent you from eating the grain I gifted you, or stop you from living on the land that I had purchased. It did not keep you from admiring me, from respecting me, from befriending me. The fact I was not born in Rome did not prevent me, it seems, from being one
of you.

After a week of Cicero and his band creating a climate of fear through nothing more elaborate than empty words and false reports of rabblerousing, the disgust at my one true fault was easily capitalised. I like to think that some of you voted for the death sentence simply so you would not have to hear yet another of Cicero’s speeches, a desire I can sympathize with. You have sentenced me to death, and I have no way of contesting that sentence without Roman citizenship. Without it, I am but one of many faceless barbarians that can be killed for the Senate and the Roman people.

Have you ever wondered, you who are lucky enough to have the privilege of Roman nationality, what makes you worthier than others? If any of you were accused of a crime, you would be allowed a trial before anybody could lay their hand on you, as my accuser himself reminded us all in his prosecution of Gaius Verres. He proffered the words civis romanus sum as a shield for the Romans who had suffered Verres’ crimes, and now he uses them against me. An old dog does not learn new tricks after all. It struck me as odd, back then, that the only way for Verres to be guilty of a crime, when he had used his position of governor to steal a man’s property and have him whipped, was to show the man who had been whipped was a Roman citizen. Was what he had done not villainous to start with, regardless of the victim? In other words, did the repulsiveness of the crime come from the victim, and not the man who had perpetrated it?

I believed then, and I still do now that Verres’ acts were vile, because he robbed a man of his possessions and had him beaten, not because the man was Roman. Do you understand what it is I am saying? Can you read my words, understand my reasoning? If we are not all citizens, we can still understand each other, we can still reason which each other, I can still talk to you. Is that not enough to earn me a modicum of respect, for these things that we share in spite of it all?

You have heard my side of the story, and I hope for some of you it will be enough to believe in my innocence. Perhaps I should be satisfied to leave this world with a few friends to remember me fondly. But I would not have arrived where I am today without enough anger at the world to want more from it than what little goodness it offers freely. While you are listening to me, Romans, I want you to ask yourselves, who is truly foreign to you? Is it the honest merchant, who lives in your midst and offers you meals when he can? Or is it the senators, who live in mansions worth more than what you could win in three lifetimes? Who tax you for a little over three quarters of what you make slaving in the quarries, to fund yet
another war from which you will never see the benefits? Who vote to instigate such a war, while you are the ones who will have to spill your blood on the battlefield? Who lounge in their lavish atriums, who eat so much they make themselves vomit to eat more, while you ration mouldy flour to last a few more days?

You must see by now, from the slums they force you to live in, from the famines they cause and the distance they place between you and them, that at least they do not see you as their countrymen or their kin, wherever it is you were born. Thus, I ask you, the beating heart of this city, why stick to their definition of who deserves respect? Can you not see you share more with me than with them? We have lived the same life; we have shared the same bread.

The senators have attacked me because they see the end of Rome in a city where the common people can eat to their satisfaction. But I would have thought it would take more to end the most powerful city in the world, the home of the Republican ideals. If there were something to kill those ideals, I would have thought it would be hanging a person without a fair trial. But how would I know, the records do not list me as a Roman.

And thus, we arrive at the elephant in the room, you have walked all this way to take me to my execution. Unless I am imagining things, I can hear you at the gate. I always complained to Silanus that he should oil its hinges, but at least today its squeak sounds the alarm for me. The mob they had feared I would form against them has come to put an end to me. After all this I cannot fault the nobili’s ability to strike two birds with one stone. I would not delay the inevitable, so before you arrive, I will go and tie the noose around my neck. Now you have finished this letter, come upstairs, and you may kick the stool from under my feet, to punish me for my alleged crimes, or for making you read this letter, whichever you deem more reprehensible.

You may also decide to untie the rope from my neck. A friend did so many years ago when I was freed from slavery. I had hoped it had been the last time I would be bound for the good of Rome. Alas, even freed from slavery the common people have the hands of the nobili around their necks. I am not the only one you could decide to free tonight, I think.

My name is Lucius Gracchus Lepidus and I am not a Roman citizen. Will you treat me as a fellow human?