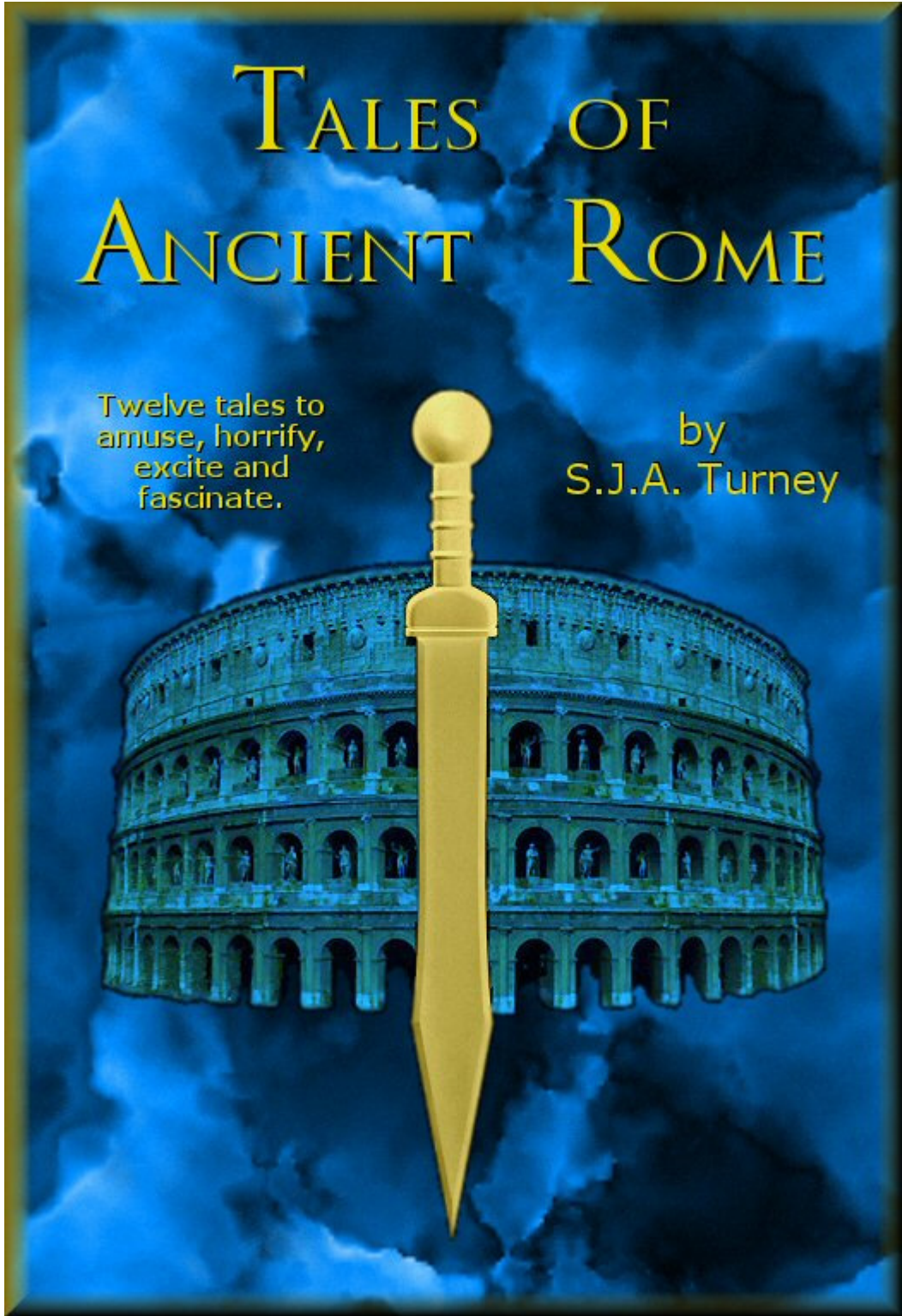


TALES OF ANCIENT ROME

Twelve tales to
amuse, horrify,
excite and
fascinate.

by
S.J.A. Turney



Tales of Ancient Rome

A collection of short stories by S.J.A. Turney

This collection is also available on the author's website:
www.sjaturney.co.uk

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First Edition

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Hold The Wall

It seemed like days since they had come the first time, drifting like ghosts from the mist, death incarnate, shrouded in white. Forgais, the commander of the limitanei troops who garrisoned the milecastle, leaned back and sighed, lifting the rim of his simple iron helm and wiped away the sweat and grime.

Glancing to his left he could see Saturninus and Artorio leaning against the stonework and breathing deeply, recovering from the last push. Finn and Carro at the wall's curve to his right completed the remaining garrison.

Just in case, he turned and scanned the interior for the hundredth hopeful time. No. Just the five of them left now. The few bodies that remained in the yard of the milecastle below had already turned grey in the cold, with no blood to warm them, their skin tone matching the frosted gravel. Twisted grins and mangled limbs, lying where they had fallen from the wall. This morning there had been nine defenders, and before nightfall last eve: sixteen. The son-of-a-whore barbarians in this forbidding northern land never seemed to let up, even at night. It had been almost two days since he'd slept and he was starting to feel far too groggy to keep control of the situation.

Twenty men down to just five in less than two days. He bit down hard on his personal suspicion that the milecastles on either side, as well as the nearest fort, Aesica Castrum, were probably suffering similar attacks at this point. No good would come of snatching away the last ounces of hope the others still clung to. He blew on his hands to warm them. At least the wall was still in Roman hands, since none of the bloodthirsty bastards had come along the parapet yet; when they did, the game would be over.

There was no hope of sending for relief; they could only wait and fight to the last and hope that it came unsought. Aesica, two miles away to the west, was out of sight in the gloomy mist. Two short miles, but it might as well be a hundred. Hell, anywhere more than twenty yards from the wall was indistinct in the white fog, and had been since the enemy first came.

Briefly, he re-considered sending a runner to try and fetch help, but quickly he discounted the possibility. They had tried that twice before over the last couple of days. Somehow some of the enemy had managed to get south of the wall and both times a runner left that gate he had been peppered with arrows before the mist even enveloped him. How many there were and where they lurked would remain a mystery, at least until the fog lifted, though there could only be few as they hadn't made a try for the gate. With only five defenders left, none could be spared to make a try for it.

What had led to this sudden siege would also likely remain a mystery. The men who were coming out of the mist in both darkness and light were snarling maniacs, spittle on their lips and murder in their eyes. But they weren't the blue-painted, spike-haired cannibals that people said lived to the north and would come soon for blood. These were farmers, fishermen, smiths; ordinary people, just like those to the south of the great wall of the Emperor Aelius Hadrianus. Ordinary people like Forgais had been five short years ago, down to the south in Isurium. What had driven ordinary people to this?

A blood-curdling cry sounded somewhere in the mist and was picked up and whooped by numerous other voices.

"They're coming again, lads."

There was a chorus of tired and fatalistic nods from the other four and they wearily hoisted their huge, round shields onto sagging arms, propping swords where they could be easily retrieved, and hefting their heavy spears. The men crossed themselves and muttered prayers to God almighty that he either spare them or grant them a swift and noble death and accept them into his kingdom afterwards. All except Carro, of course, who still refused to acknowledge the truth of the church and had alone maintained the fires in the mithraeum a couple of miles away for years. Even Carro made prayers in his own way, though. Somehow, in the face of a screaming enemy, the months of argument over the truth of the one God seemed petty.

“Carro? Best get down below and make sure the gate’s still secure. Shore it up with anything you can find. See if there’s anything left of the bunks in the barracks.”

The shorter, dark-haired man nodded, hoisting his shield and weapons and making for the staircase down.

“Finn and Saturninus: you take the corners. Artorio, you’re in the middle with me. Anyone got any plumbata left?”

The men shook their heads. The last of the heavy, iron darts had been used hours ago, but he had to be sure. The small piles of rocks and bricks they had gathered desperately this morning as additional missiles was all but depleted too. The stones they would be able to throw now were little more than pebbles; nothing but an irritation to the attackers.

He glanced over the parapet, being careful not to lean too heavily. The battlements were less than secure. The mortar was ancient and crumbling and the stones often loosely stacked atop one another. The last repair work on the wall had been done before Forgais had been born, and even that had been done by a unit of Syrian boatmen who had as much knowledge of construction and engineering as they did of weapon-smithing or property law. This was not like the ancient days when well-paid and heavily-armoured men learned a craft and fought in drilled precision to expand the borders of the Empire.

The nearest of the old legions was half a world away in Deva, and even they were poorly-paid and equipped these days, with priority given instead to the field army of the Dux Britannicus. Forgais tapped the laminated plates of his armour, an antique he had purchased at great expense in the forum at Isurium on his last visit. It really was in excellent condition given its age. Apart from Saturninus with his chain shirt, he was the only one with any kind of armour.

His wandering attention was brought sharply back to the present as a thrown axe smashed into the wall two feet below where he stood, sending shards of facing stone out into the mist and releasing a cloud of desiccated mortar that resembled the mist into which it flew.

The axe fell from the wall into the mass of twisted corpses below. How many there were could no longer be counted, as they were stacked at least three or four deep, much more in places. Twenty defenders had killed more than five or six times that number. It was something to be proud of, but somehow it still wasn’t deterring the regular assaults.

“Spears!” he bellowed as the enemy began to climb the mound of bodies in dribs and drabs. Their dead were making a very effective siege

ramp. Even if the five limitanei could hold for another day, the enemy bodies would be piled so deep they could simply walk up to the parapet.

A snarling man, his beard matted with spittle and blood, threw himself against the gate of the milecastle below and the wooden door shuddered.

“Carro?”

“It’s holding” the strained reply came from below.

Suddenly a man appeared from the mist with a long spear, leaping up the mound of the dead. There was so little warning that Forgais barely ducked to the side as the nicked blade glanced off his shoulder plate, close to his cheek.

Changing his grip, he leaned against the parapet, hoping it was still strong enough, and jabbed down with his own spear. Other indistinct shapes moved behind the spearman. The mist suddenly flurried and Forgais had no idea where he was striking, but a yelp of pain confirmed his success.

An arrow zinged from the stonework close to his arm and a second buried itself with a thud in the ‘P’ of the Chi-Rho painted on his shield.

“Cover!”

A hail of arrows began as the four defenders on the wall ducked behind the stonework, their shields raised. A hundred or more arrows hissed past them, falling into the yard below and peppering the dead; others bounced from the wall below the battlements, disappearing back down into the white.

Forgais gritted his teeth and took a deep breath. He knew very well what a cloud of arrows meant. This would be perhaps the tenth time the manoeuvre had been tried in the past two days. As the last arrow fell, he stood again, dropping his shield to the walkway.

“Defend!” he bellowed, and lunged to the parapet, his spear reversed in his grasp again, the point facing down.

Below the battlements the defenders had used the cover of the arrows to rush roughly-constructed ladders to the wall and raise them. The hail of missiles had now halted to allow their own men to climb safely.

With a shout of rage, the commander leaned over the parapet and thrust down, the spear’s leaf-blade stabbing into the man climbing the ladder between his neck and shoulder and sliding deep into his chest cavity, impaling organs on its journey. The man grunted, dead before he even had time to scream, and fell into the white.

Desperately, Forgais tried to maintain his grip on the spear, but it was too tightly wedged in the falling corpse and was ripped from his grasp. Leaning over the battlement and wincing at the slight movement in the stones, he grasped the top of the ladder and thrust it back out, away from the wall.

A shout to his left attracted his attention. The curse had been in Latin. Artorio staggered back from the edge, clutching his chest. His face had that look that the commander dreaded: half surprise, half resignation.

“Sorry” was all he managed, as he toppled back from the walkway to land among his brothers in the courtyard below, a blossom of red growing on his white tunic, a flower of death.

Forgais muttered a brief prayer; all there was time for.

A face appeared at the edge, frost in the shaggy brown hair and moustache, rotten teeth bared in anger. A muscular arm hooked itself over the top as the man tried to clamber on to the parapet. Grasping the hilt of his long sword where it stood leaning against the stone, Forgais spun a full circle,

picking up enough speed as he swept out with the blade to take the top half of the man's head off.

The commander shrank back, appalled at the sight of the man's sheared head, his brain slopping out as he toppled from the wall, his expression invisible behind the destruction of his face. He turned his face away.

Happier times they had been, back in Isurium, selling fruit and vegetables, before the army had begun calling up everyone they could. Before he was made an offer he couldn't refuse and shipped to this border zone at the end of the Empire.

"Sir!"

He turned at the shout. Saturninus was gesturing toward the other end of the fort. In confusion, Forgais turned and looked at the south gate. Slowly, his ears caught the sound of combat out there in the mist. Shouts in Latin echoed away in the white and, miraculously, there was a heavy thump at the gate.

"Go get it open. Must be the relief!"

Grinning, Saturninus paused briefly to smash a climbing barbarian in the face with the pommel of his sword before running down the stairs and crossing the courtyard, leaping over the piles of his comrades until he reached the gate.

"Who goes there?" he yelled, though he was already unlatching the heavy bar.

"Volusianus, centurion of the Cohors Secundae Asturum at Aesica. Open up."

With a relieved smile, Saturninus finished unbarring the gate and swung the heavy portal open. Without pause or acknowledgement, a rider trotted into the courtyard and reigned in at the centre, close to the piles of bodies, his horse prancing impatiently, four heavily-armoured men following him in and standing to attention behind him. Saturninus peered through the gate but, seeing nothing without, turned back to the visitor, frowning.

A brief glance over the wall's edge told Forgais he had a few moments before the next push. Two bodies screamed and writhed at the wall's foot, but nothing else stirred in the mist. Turning in to look down at the figure in the courtyard, he sighed with relief.

"Sir?" he shouted, his heart lurching. He barely allowed himself to believe it. Relief! The relief was arriving at last. They had clearly dealt with the archers outside the south gate already from the earlier sounds of combat.

"Who's in command here?" the centurion called out, eyeing the dead before him.

"I am, sir. Forgais: commander of the Numerus Gaesatorum Raetorum. We never thought you'd arrive, sir. We've held. Almost to the last man, but the wall's held, sir."

The man's expression hardly changed.

"You are under attack?"

Forgais squinted through the drifting mist.

"Sir? Yes. The wall holds, but not for much longer. Where are the others?"

The officer frowned, waving the question aside with a sweep of his hand.

“How many are left here?”

“Four, sir. And they’re still coming.”

As if to add weight to his words more crashes and shouts arose and Finn, at end of the wall, lunged out across the battlements with his sword. Forgais nodded at his friend and then turned back to the visitor. It was hard to feel pride in Rome when she barely knew you existed these days, but pride in duty and a job well-done was hard to take away.

“Sir?”

The centurion nodded, thoughtfully and tapped his lip.

“Well, come down from there and gather your equipment quickly. Four men is better than none, I suppose, though I was expecting the full numerus.”

It was Forgais’ turn to frown.

“Sir?” he repeated once more.

“The general Magnus Maximus had ordered the withdrawal of our forces. The prefect at Aesica sent me to fetch your unit. Be proud, commander. We travel to Rome to make an Emperor.”

“But the wall?” Forgais gestured to the small fort around him.

“Leave it for the farmers; we have higher concerns now. I shall expect you at Aesica within the hour.”

Without a further glance, the officer turned and rode back out through the south gate, his guard of four men following obediently. Forgais stood silent, his eyes wide and angry, breath frosting in the air. His gaze took in the milecastle with its twin barrack blocks, stripped of bunks yesterday to provide the timber to reinforce and bolster the north gate. The bodies of the numerus, laying where they fell, mute witness to the proud defence of... what? A wall that some Spanish ponce in a fur hat had decided was no longer important if he had a chance at the purple?

He realised the others had paused and were watching him, waiting for orders. Even as they stood silently, regarding their commander, the hail of arrows began again, the very first one taking Saturninus through the eye and plunging him over the edge to the ever-increasing pile of their fallen companions.

“What do we do?”

Forgais turned to Finn and shrugged.

“I don’t know about you, but I don’t care what the commander at Aesica says, Gratianus is my Emperor, not Magnus Maximus or any other would-be usurper. I intend to follow the orders of my emperor: hold the wall.”

The hail of arrows slowed and ended.

“Ready for the ladders, lads!”

Cries of rage, defiance and pride rang out, enveloped quickly by the shrouding mist.

Vigil

Gaius Postumus turned over in his bed, snorting and pulling the cover tight up to his throat. What a lovely dream. He knew it was a dream, for sure, but continued forcing himself to stay that little bit more sleepy, prolonging the night time images as long as possible. Half a sow turned on the spit, fat dripping down into the fire and sizzling with a delicious smell. Probably wine. Those goblets looked like wine goblets. He wondered who was holding the party, since he seemed to be the only guest. Why so many goblets and so much food just for him.

Finally, the messages from his frantic and overactive nostrils won through a passage into his gluttonous brain, and Postumus' right eye flicked open with some difficulty, the sticky sleep still trying to hold it shut.

Smoke?

His eye closed again and a satisfied smile crept across his face. Of course there would be smoke. You couldn't roast a hog without there being some smoke. He would have to tell Safranius how delicious it was in the morning.

Safranius.

The morning.

Smoke.

The eye flicked open again.

In a fraction of a second, before even the left eye could join its fellow in wideness, Postumus was out of the bed and frantically panicking, spinning this way and that and waving his arms, achieving entirely nothing.

He stopped, trying to remember his training through the combined fog of sleep and panic. As one of the vigiles, the fire-fighters of Rome, Postumus had been trained well and trained hard for months in every aspect of his duties. It had been said, even by his mother, that his head was so thick that not even basic concepts could pass into it. Hurtful and untrue, but he had to sadly confirm that at this very point, standing in his room on the second floor of the insula that had been allocated as the headquarters of the Second century in the Fourth cohort of vigiles, he couldn't even remember his name without concentrating really hard.

Safranius would kill him.

The heavy pall of roiling smoke was coming under the door to his room in puffs. That meant it must be coming up the stairwell.

Postumus slapped his hand over his face. Idiot. His had been the simplest duty of all, tonight. The rest of the century were absent. Half of them were asleep in their own homes, it being their week off-duty. Many of the others had been given special leave to go to the Lucaria festival. The rest would be out patrolling the streets, watching for signs of fire or for acts of criminal behaviour. Safranius would be leading the first patrol.

He would be less than happy to get back to the headquarters some time just before dawn to find it had been gutted by fire and all because the untrustworthy idiot he left in charge of the insula had started the stove in the kitchen to cook his fish supper and had come over ever so tired and gone to bed, leaving it burning.

Prat.

His days in the vigiles would almost certainly be numbered after this. Particularly given that debacle last week with the explosion at the emporium. His wages would be halved for the next thousand years to pay for the replacement pump.

Hurriedly throwing on a cloak and grateful that he'd gone to sleep wearing his tunic and breeches and not even unlacing his boots because he was so tired, he decided on his course of action. He would have to check the extent of the fire and get down to the yard. In the central courtyard that had previously been the light well for the insula, a series of large tablets on the walls bore the instructions and rules and regulations for all trainee vigiles. He would have to read them and remind himself of what to do next.

Reaching out, he grasped the door handle and pulled.

The words 'back draft' rose though the levels of denseness in his head a fraction of a second before the explosion of boiling fire blew the suddenly freed door into the room, knocking him flat, but miraculously protecting him from the worst of the heat.

Struggling out from under the battered portal, he peered fearfully around the room. The blast had calmed and the fire was starting to take hold on the walls and furniture in his room. Pulling himself upright, he wandered across to the large bronze mirror next to a small glowing oil lamp that seemed almost ridiculous in the circumstances.

His eyebrows had gone and his lush, curly black hair had disappeared as far back as his ears, leaving only tiny charred stumps. His face was covered in sooty grime, pink lines extending from his eyes where he had instinctively screwed them up.

He looked idiotic. But then people told him that under normal circumstances, too.

Leaning to the side, he peered out into the corridor. The formerly painted walls, white and red, with a decorative strip of something he couldn't remember, were black, fire ripping its way along the wooden railing that surrounded the stair well. Leaning the other way, he could see the blanket of flame that filled the corridor, blocking off any chance of reaching the other stairs. Other than trying to jump down the fifteen foot drop into the light well, these stairs would have to do.

All the vigiles had practiced the jump, of course. They were supposed to be able to manage something as easy as that. It was often required in the course of duty. Postumus, with his somewhat portly figure and his apparently severed connection between mental function and the gangling muscle-free flesh he called limbs, had never managed anything but a temporarily-crippling belly-flop onto the hard floor. He had in the past year, broken one ankle, twisted another, cracked five ribs and broken his nose during training jumps. Two months ago Safranuis had given up trying.

Honestly, if it weren't for his illustrious lineage and the sizeable donations his long-suffering father made to help the vigiles, he would probably have been thrown out long ago.

Taking a deep breath and gagging on the smoke, he stepped closer to the stairs, muttering a quick and very fervent prayer to the lares and Penates of the building.

A flickering orange glow was visible through the cracks in the wooden staircase. Downstairs was already an inferno. But there was nothing else for it. He had to brave it.

Putting one foot delicately on the top step, he applied pressure and winced as it groaned and shifted underfoot. Biting his lip, he put all his weight on that leg and moved down a step. Another charred groan.

Postumus whimpered and hoped his bladder would hold under the panicked pressure.

He was just reaching out with his first leg again when a noise caught his attention.

'Meeee-owwwwwwooooo?'

"Mister Socks!"

The second step cracked as he turned hurriedly and ran back up into the corridor. Mister Socks was the station cat; a mangy, fat thing with an evil temper, one ruined eye, a perforated ear and a bad case of flatulence. Of the eighty periodical occupants of the building, the only one that treated Postumus as anything other than an unfortunate piece of furniture was Mister Socks. It wasn't that he didn't bite and scratch the overweight vigil; he did, and frequently, but less frequently than he bit and scratched the others.

Of course, it was Postumus that fed Mister Socks, which might go a long way to explaining it. Many of the others just kicked the station cat and would happily evict the menacing, evil creature. It was Postumus that had renamed 'That Smelly Bastard Cat' as Mister Socks. It was so much nicer.

Running along the corridor, he spotted the four legged terror of the station crouched in a doorway, hissing at the danger all around. Beyond, the inferno had gripped the corridor, making it impassable to man and beast alike. Through the doorway, the glow of violent orange spoke volumes. A rafter fell between the two of them, roaring with dancing flames and sealing off the cat. Even the wooden frame of the balcony above the light well on remaining wall was starting to char and fall away.

"Don't worry Mister Socks. I'm coming."

Carefully, he edged toward the burning beam and jumped across it, just as another fell where he had been standing but a moment before. His heart lurched. A whole insula, just for the sake of a late night snack and forty winks!

Reaching out, his face turned away from the searing heat, he reached out for Mister Socks, muttering soothing noises.

The cat turned its one baleful eye on him and leapt away, momentarily touching the charring balcony to gain leverage, and dropped to the courtyard below, landing, as expected, on its feet. Postumus leaned close to the balcony and stared down to see Mister Socks give him a superior glance, turn, display its bottom in graphic detail, and then prance away to the safety of the street.

Postumus sobbed.

Standing straight and taking in ragged breaths, the vigil nodded to himself and turned. Taking two steps carefully across the burning rafters, he felt his bowels loosen a little as a third crashed down next to him, bouncing off his foot and hurting his little toe.

A moment later, he was back at the stairs.

Carefully navigating the first, he passed over the cracked second step and winced as the third almost gave under him. He could feel the hot glow beneath him and a gust of warm air blew his tunic up around his armpits.

Pushing it back down coquettishly, he stepped as lightly as possible down the stairs to the first turning. The fire on the floor below was blazing, filling the corridors. There was no way out that did not involve passing through a wall of fire.

Taking yet another deep breath and gagging and coughing on the roiling smoke, he unfastened his cloak from around his neck and wrapped it around him as thoroughly as he could, leaving a small spy-hole to see through.

Damn that cat.

“One...”

Safranius was going to crucify him.

“Two...”

The people out in the street would be watching in amusement as the fire-watch station burned down, knowing damn well who was at the heart of the problem.

“Three!”

Lowering his head, Postumus charged into the sheet of roaring flame, his legs pumping as they scorched and seared while he ran, heedless of the pain, through the corridor, around the bend, past the well-room and its blessed water, through the courtyard, where he managed a couple of deep, cleansing breaths without slowing, and on into the far side of the building.

The main corridor ran from the light well and past rooms that had once been people’s residences, out past the shops that occupied the outer façade, looking onto the street.

Without pausing, he ran on along the corridor. The flames had not yet consumed the main entrance, but it was dark and solid with smoke.

Choking, wheezing, and stinging red from the heat, Postumus burst out into the street, the twin hills of the Palatine and Caelian rising before him, behind the insulae opposite. He stopped, heaving breaths, bent double with his hands on his knees, coughing up black dust and spitting soot onto the road.

Mister Socks appeared from nowhere and rubbed around his red raw ankles, purring affectionately.

It was then that Postumus straightened and looked about him.

Buildings flowered with blooms of flame. Roiling black columns rose from insulae along the street. Flames burst from windows and screaming citizens ran wildly in the thoroughfare, their panic infectious.

The city was afire.

But something Safranius had taught him had apparently stuck in his brain after all.

How to track the source of a fire.

Buildings were burning all the way along the street and up side alleys also. But the progression was clear. The insula of the Second century in the Fourth cohort of vigiles was the furthest gone and the epicentre of the spreading chaos.

“Gods, Postumus. What have you done?”

* * * * *

The great fire of 64 AD burned for five and a half days and levelled three quarters of the city, destroying thousands of homes and some of the grandest buildings that had stood for half a millennium. Rumour placed the cause in the hands of the Emperor Nero, who hurriedly, and very effectively, passed the blame on down to the burgeoning cult of Christians.

Gaius Postumus rose to the rank of tribune, commanding one of the cohorts of Vigiles, one of few survivors of the service during the conflagration. Of the fate of his fish supper, history does not relate.

Lucilla

Lucilla licked her lips and rolled over, pulling the covers tighter. The room was chilly in the November night, frost forming on the garden of the villa outside her wall, the bone-cold breeze sneaking in through the shutters and lowering the room's temperature.

Briefly she contemplated leaving the room and going to the closet to collect a spare blanket. Possibly one of the slaves would still be up and about preparing things for the morning and could get her one. Certainly if her mother or father caught her wandering around the villa's corridors at this time of night, no amount of defensive argument over the temperature would save her from trouble.

She rolled back over again, irritation at her parents bringing her extra wakefulness and driving elusive sleep that bit further away. It wasn't that she didn't love her parents. Of course she did; they were her parents, after all. But they were sometimes a little too careful about her, instituting so many rules to keep her safe and sound that at times her safe, sound life felt more like a prison.

The few friends she'd had years ago were gone now, leaving the valley and its wealthy villas, taken to Deva where they were matched and married off. Oh, Lucilla should have been married and gone from here more than two or three years herself. She was hardly a girl anymore, anyway. At sixteen years, she should already be contemplating her own children.

But she wasn't healthy. No man would want her, as her father told her repeatedly. Her body was too frail; too weak. She was not the bright and robust girl her friends had known when they used to play in the woods and river of the valley.

It had begun with the visit from her sister. Her father would deny that, of course, as would her mother. But then they had always denied even the very existence of her sister. Whatever Livia had done when Lucilla was still a baby had been so horrifying that they had shut her out of their life, not even speaking of her. Only one or two of the slaves spoke warmly of her when confiding in Lucilla.

She turned over again, shivering in the wind, wondering once more about getting that blanket.

Yes, it had begun with her sister; that first night about three years ago when she had found out that Livia even existed. The older girl, very reminiscent of her younger sibling, had defied their parents and crept back into the house, into Lucilla's room. She hadn't said anything, just stood watching with a sad smile on her face. It made Lucilla's heart break to think of her sister being out there in the outbuildings, denied her parent's love and the comforts of the villa. Perhaps that was why mother and father kept Lucilla so safe?

No. That was because of her frailty. But her frailty had begun then. It had, as she had said, made her heart break. Quite literally. The next morning, the robust girl was gone, leaving this pale, willowy, feeble girl with the short breath and the twitch.

Her mother had been quite distraught, and her father, calling on his veteran's benefits, had brought the legion's chief medicus from Deva to examine her. The surgeon had explained, after lengthy tests, that her heart

was damaged. Some great shock had actually stopped it for a time, and it had resumed its beat with a problem.

The care and virtual imprisonment had begun that day. Perhaps she would have recovered in time; found herself a handsome soldier to wed, and been gone from this dreadful, grey, chilling villa, if only she had not declined in steps.

Every step, of course, coincided with the infrequent visits from her sister. Livia could only sneak into the house very rarely when it was dark and everyone but Lucilla was asleep. Perhaps twice or three times a year she came.

Every time was a wrench for Lucilla. She loved her poor, exiled sister so much and the warmth of her return filled her with a fleeting joy that soon plummeted into the icy river of sadness again as Livia, wordlessly, smiled that sad smile and returned to her freezing den in the outbuildings.

Lucilla had stopped telling her parents about Livia's visits after the first year, as the conversation inevitable led to an argument and anger from her father, denial that Livia could have come to see her, and an extra layer of cold security being placed around their younger daughter.

But the visits still came. Livia never explained why she came or how she could live like she did, but Lucilla didn't care. It was enough even to see her beautiful sister on those rare occasions. Even if it was rapidly dragging her toward her own demise, her weakening heart now making it dangerous for her even to leave the interior of the villa. Eventually, if she died, her sister would join her and they would be together in the beyond, living in the light of Sol Invictus.

Too cold. The temperature just appeared to be dropping all the time. It had merely been chilly earlier, but Lucilla would swear she could see ice on the shutters, reflecting the moonlight shining through the crack in the shutters. Frost seemed to be forming on her blanket.

She gave a deep sigh and sank back into her blankets, feeling the welcome pull of sleep at last.

It was then she knew that Livia was in the room. Shuddering, she sat up rigid to see the pale figure in her grey tunic, with the long, lustrous black tresses of her hair hanging low, touched and speckled with the frost.

Lucilla smiled. It had been long months since her last visit. She straightened her night tunic and raised her eyebrows questioningly. Livia never spoke, of course. She couldn't. But Lucilla instinctively knew what her sister was wanting or trying to say.

Livia curled a beckoning finger, and Lucilla frowned. This was new. She'd never left the bed before. A surge of dangerous excitement ran through her cold, frail figure. Could Livia be taking her to show her the den where she spent her time? Gingerly, wincing at the freezing marble of the floor, Lucilla swung out her legs and climbed from the bed, swaying slightly for a moment, before she got herself under control. Her legs were so weak she had to shuffle toward the figure in the doorway, holding out her hand to the wall to steady herself.

Livia smiled that sad smile of hers, but this time, actually walking toward her, it didn't drive Lucilla's spirits down into that icy river of loss once more. Instead she felt the electric thrill of discovery. She would, she knew instinctively, find out about her sister this time. She had to. It felt right.

As she approached the open doorway of her room, the corridor dark beyond, Livia beckoned once more and then slipped around the corner out of sight.

A sense of urgency overtaking her, unwilling to let her sister out of her sight for fear she might lose her entirely, Lucilla let go of the wall and tottered quickly to the doorway, her feet slapping on the freezing floor.

The move was too quick for her frail body and as she reached the door jamb, dizziness overcame her and she slumped, her mind fogging with confusion and pain, her body cold and aching. It was almost half a minute before she pulled herself up, peering off around the corner, hoping her sister was still there.

And there was her room. Somehow, during her dizzy fall, she must have got turned around and confused.

There was Livia, lying on her back on the bed, her grey, thin face surrounded by lustrous black hair as she rested among the blankets and pillows. She looked so peaceful.

Lucilla smiled sadly. Best not disturb her now. She'd come back and see her soon.

The man who bought an Empire

Lamp-light glinted off the cuirass of burnished bronze with its protective medusa head, honorific scorpion emblem and winged horses and off the tip of the gladius in the man's hand. Breath clouded in the chilly night air and condensation formed on the red-painted walls.

Titus Flavius Genialis leaned around the corner of the corridor and glanced left and right sharply before pulling back to safety.

"No one. The passage is clear, Caesar, but we must hurry."

Behind him, the emperor Marcus Didius Julianus flattened against the wall, wild-eyed and breathing heavily. His normally intricately-combed and curled black beard hung loose and ragged, much like his hair. His normally swarthy, handsome features were strangely pale and glistening, the result of such desperate nerves. His toga was muddy and covered in dust from the many hiding places they had been forced to utilise on the way through the enormous Palatine palace complex.

"Where now, prefect?"

Genialis shrugged.

"Rome crawls with your enemies, Caesar. The circus maximus throngs with the soldiers of Severus; his agents are abroad across the forum and the Capitol. Most of the praetorian cohorts are already shouting his name. There is nowhere to go but to your chambers and prepare for death."

The emperor stared at the commander of his praetorian guard. Behind them, Julianus' son in law shuddered like the inveterate coward he was.

"I thought you were helping me escape!"

Genialis sighed.

"I would give my life if it would save yours, Caesar, but there is simply no escape. Rome belongs to Severus now. All that is left for you is to decide the manner of your end."

"There is a way. There must be a way. We can leave the palace by the servants' quarters. Make our way down the hill past the Magna Mater temple dressed as common folk and head to the docks. We can be in Ostia by dawn and then take ship to anywhere we want."

Genialis' lip curled. It galled him in the extreme to be laying his life on the line for such a man but, regardless of what anyone said about the praetorian guard, he had only been prefect for a month and was damned if he would be remembered for turning on his rightful emperor in a time of trouble. When it was over and Severus came, he would decide whether Genialis should live or die, but for now the rightful emperor of Rome should stand proud as the office he held demanded.

"Nero fled his palace in disguise. It gave him little extra time, and think how eternity remembers him. Come, Caesar."

The praetorian commander ducked around the corner and ran lightly down the beautiful mosaic floor, his white cloak billowing behind him.

The ruler of the world's greatest Empire peered nervously around the corner, reluctant to follow this man who claimed to be leading him to his end, but equally sure of the fatal nature of cowering alone in these corridors. Severus' supporters were already in the Palatine complex somewhere and could be here at any moment.

He felt an embarrassing warm trickle and cursed his nerves.

More than thirty million sesterces he had paid the guard to secure this throne and here he was, after little more than two months under the purple, fleeing through his own palace from the rabble of a barely-literate African thug. Where had the majesty and glory of the Empire gone? Where had justice gone?

Ignoring the warm yellow pool gathering in his boot, he waved his son-in-law on with him and rounded the corner to see his praetorian prefect ahead, holding open the door to the great chamber that overlooked the circus maximus.

Running breathlessly, he pounded down the corridor in his soft, stinking leather shoes and hurtled through the door, throwing himself onto the low couch by a table covered in fruit and dining accoutrements.

"Perhaps I can appeal to them again? Severus might want to exile me? I could go and be governor of Hispania? I think I'd like Hispania. They make a lot of fish sauce there, and I like garum. Maybe I could build an estate and retire? Just grow olives or something? I could..."

He stopped rambling in shock as his guard commander gave him a stinging slap across the face.

"You are the emperor of Rome for however long you have left. Have the grace to act like it!"

Julianus stared. He hadn't paid this man's unit more than thirty million sesterces just to be treated like this: like a schoolboy.

"Don't shout at me!" he burred petulantly.

Genialis shook his head in disgust.

"I took your money and the vow to protect you. If it weren't for that, Caesar, I would see nothing worth protecting!"

The prefect tossed his gladius into the air and caught it deftly by the blade, proffering the hilt to his master. The emperor stared at the weapon.

"No!"

"Do the honourable thing, Caesar, and I shall do what I can to protect your daughter and son-in-law. If they renounce their titles, Severus and the senate may let them live."

Repentinus, the only recently married son-in-law of Julianus, nodded vigorously.

"Caesar, you must save your daughter!"

Again, Genialis' lip curled in revulsion at the constant displays of cowardice and fear this family exhibited. Despite his oath to serve and protect them, he was rapidly becoming convinced that Severus, the 'Lion of Leptis', might just be exactly what Rome needed: a strong leader, unafraid and severe.

Marcus Didius Julianus, master of the world, hugged the couch and wept like a little girl, his nose running, mucus matting his moustache.

"Get up!" Genialis snapped at him.

The heap of toga, shuddering and whining, remained exactly where it was, the cowardly Repentinus gingerly embracing his father-in-law, ostensibly begging him to save the young princess. Genialis was in no doubt as to whose skin the young man was really interested in saving.

"Get up!" he barked again.

Reaching down, he grasped the emperor by the throat, bunching the folds of the toga in his fist and hauling the man to his feet with a grunt. The

waxy, pale Julianus, tears in his red-rimmed eyes and mucus in his beard, staggered, his knees quaking, the stink of urine about him.

Genialis thrust the gladius into his unwilling hands and folded the emperor's fingers around the hilt. Julianus stared down at the weapon and raised it hesitantly, gesturing at the prefect. Genialis sneered and simply batted it aside.

"Killing me would hardly help you, Caesar."

"Perhaps I can appeal to the masses? To the army? I still have a fortune. They're gathered in the circus maximus, you say? I could shower them with sesterces from here! They will hear me and they will love me and I'll be safe and they'll kill Severus and I'll rule Rome and I'll be safe forever and..."

Another ringing slap stopped him chattering. He pulled away, the sword in his hand, and started toward the balcony before stopping dead again. His son-in-law was standing on the hem of his partially-undone toga, shivering, while the praetorian prefect glared at him with barely concealed loathing, his arms folded.

"Repentinus!" he barked, but the young man remained where he was, reached toward him, gripping the blade of the gladius in the emperor's hand and gently pulled it from his grasp.

"Yes, yes" Julianus nodded. "I won't need that, you're right. I can buy them off. I will buy their love."

Repentinus nodded and turned.

Genialis' eyes widened as the young, cowering son-in-law drove the blade deep into the praetorian officer's side, above the cuirass and below his folded arms, pushing the hilt with a grunt and listening to the grating as the blade slid between bones and vital organs. It was a masterly blow, worthy of a soldier; an almost instant kill.

Silenced first by shock and then simply by the journey to Elysium, Titus Flavius Genialis, prefect of the Praetorian Guard, collapsed in a heap, his legs buckling beneath him as blood rushed from the mortal wound in his side. A single gasp escaped his lips. Repentinus let go of the sword hilt and helped lower the dead man to the floor with a surprising show of respect. Fumbling with his toga, the young man stood.

Julianus, his eyes still wide with shock, started to nod madly, grinning like an idiot.

"Of course. Good boy. He had to go. He would never have let me live. Now we can buy them off and I can..."

His voice tailed off as Repentinus stood again. The respectful lowering of the body and strange toga-fumbling had simply been the boy removing the prefect's dagger from his belt. Now he brandished the leaf-shaped blade with a sad, resigned look.

"What is it, Repentinus?" the emperor squeaked.

"You see, Caesar, there is a problem. Genialis would never manage to save us. Severus will kill him for simply being in your guard, and Didia and I will follow quickly. But he was right that you simply have to die. No amount of generosity and coin will save you now. But there is still time for me to secure my future."

Reaching out with his free hand, he grasped the emperor's toga and bunched it in his fist in the same fashion as Genialis had done.

The emperor stared in shock and panic.

“But you’re my family!” he wailed.

“Sadly you’re no longer in mine, Caesar.”

Julianus tried to say something. His last words may have been profound and noble, though they probably weren’t. Whatever they may have been, they were inaudible as Repentinus drew the knife across his throat, watching as the blood began to gush and spray, soaking his own toga.

Letting go of his father-in-law as he fell, Repentinus ignored the thrashing as the emperor tried to hold his throat closed, making hissing, rattling sounds. Reaching down with the knife, he began the onerous task of sawing through the prefect’s neck with the razor-sharp dagger and removing the head. Moments later, treading through the blood-slick, he repeated the process on the now-expired emperor.

Letting the knife fall and grasping the heads by the hair, he walked, one in each hand, toward the balcony.

Quintus Aemilius Saturninus, loyal soldier of Septimius Severus and future prefect of the Praetorian Guard looked up. The crowds of soldiers in the circus maximus continued to shout momentarily, but the noise gradually died away as they took note of the small figure, high up in the palace window perhaps sixty or eighty feet above them, past the stands of the circus and the Imperial box.

The man was clearly wearing a toga, though it could be seen even at this distance that it was stained heavily red.

“Behold the heads” the figure repeated for the third time, now finally sure of attention in the silence, “of the traitorous renegade Marcus Didius Julianus and his chief enforcer Genialis!”

With masterly theatrics, the man hurled first one head and then the other out into the air, watching along with the gathered crowd of legionaries as the heads of the emperor and praetorian prefect struck the seating area below the window and bounced, clunked and rolled down the stands until they fell, bloody and battered, to the sand of the circus.

The guards stared down at the grisly prizes as the killer in the window bellowed once again.

“Hail and long life to the Emperor Septimius Severus, Lion of Leptis!”

A roar rose from the crowd.

And so passed Marcus Didius Julianus: the man who bought Rome.
Sold by his own kin in return for a future.

Trackside seats

Lentullus leaned to his left, closing on Citus' ear to be heard over the general hubbub.

"Should be a good one today. Prudens is up for the greens, and you know what he's like."

Citus' voice came back, deep and hoarse as always.

"He'll have a hard race against Sura, make no mistake."

Lentullus let out a low chuckle. According to his sources, which were, after all, quality ones, Prudens stood little chance of a loss today. His team had been carefully selected from the best steeds bred by Sarmatian trainers who knew their horses better than any man. Certainly his sources damn well should be correct, given the amount he paid them. Even if Prudens walked away with a clear victory today, Lentullus' profits would be heavily eaten into by what he owed to various people 'in the know'. Of course the profit he cleared would still buy him the nice new estate down near Antium he had his eye on... figuratively speaking, of course.

"Andros? Are you there?"

The slave turned to his master, grateful that the latter's long-term total blindness prevented him from seeing the expression on the young, long-suffering Greek's face.

"I am, master."

"What's happening?"

Lentullus lounged back, his hand tapping along the marble of the seat toward Citus until it closed on the cheese and grapes that rested between them on a bronze plate.

"Master... the quadriga aren't out yet, but I can see movement in the carceres. Should be any moment now."

"Don't miss a thing, boy. You hear? If this goes well, I'll perhaps take you with me to Antium for the weekend."

Andros nodded, frowning, trying to keep the ennui and sarcasm from his voice while speaking. Lentullus was sharp enough, but his equally blind friend Citus could almost hear an eyebrow rising.

"Thank you, sir."

"Good. Now pay attention."

Citus leaned to his friend.

"You say the boy is good?"

"Excellent. It's almost as good as actually seeing it, though I have to admit it's been so long I can barely remember."

Andros leaned forward onto the rail, looking along to his left toward the starting gates. The crowd thronged the circus maximus, every stand full to capacity. He shouldn't complain, really. How many slaves got to have trackside seats at one of the most important chariot races of the year? Glancing directly across, past the spina that ran along the centre of the circus, he could just make out the purple robe of the Emperor Domitian, himself leaning on a railing, the Praetorian Guard surrounding him and glinting in the sunlight.

No. He really shouldn't complain. When his family had sold him eight years ago in order to have the money to keep his brothers and sisters alive after his father's business failure and their subsequent eviction, he'd been

sure the world was going to end for him. He would end up chipping marble in a quarry or fighting gladiators for the right to live another day. His father had smiled and told him he really landed on his feet with service to the ageing blind senator, while his mother cried in a corner.

Of course, his father didn't know how strict Lentullus was. He didn't realise that the reason the senator needed a new slave was because he'd beaten the last one to death over a petty theft. But all things considered, Lentullus wasn't that bad. Andros had only ever been beaten twice, and both times he'd made mistakes. Now he was wise and knew how to hide his mistakes from the sightless senator. But it would be nice to be free again. He'd never experience manumission, of course, but he could still dream. There were people who could remove all traces of slave marks from you. You just needed to get far enough away and fast enough to evade the slave hunters.

But what use would escape be anyway. To be free and penniless in Rome was worse than any slavery.

He shook his head and concentrated as he heard a fanfare.

"Ah... this'll be it" said master Citus with a smile.

"Alright boy. Here you go. The best you can and I may even give you a free day in Antium with some coin."

That was a surprise. Lentullus was hardly noted for his generosity with money.

"The Emperor is raising his hand... and he drops the nappa cloth."

He took a deep breath. There was an art to the commentary.

"The gates spring open. First, third and fifth are out ahead. Fourth and seventh are close behind, with the others lagging. Already they are settling into that order."

The blind senators leaned forward instinctively, as though they could see better there. Citus opened his mouth to complain that he didn't know which rider was in which gate, but Andros was already thundering on with his commentary.

"From gate three, Sura in the red, has taken an early lead with a light, bronze quadriga built for speed rather than sturdiness, I'd say. His team are all blacks and pretty big, like the mountain horses from Armenia. I think that's what they are. Seems he's got two equally well-trained mares on the inner and outer position balancing the team."

Citus leaned back happily. Lentullus was absolutely right. The lad was a genius at this. Hopefully he would never let the boy go.

"Behind Sura the three, Prudens came from the first gate. He has a fairly plain quadriga, pulled by three chestnuts and a piebald. The piebald is the biggest; a really powerful looking horse, on the inside to guide and control the team. The team look a little weak in themselves, but the piebald is holding them together nicely. He's closing on Sura, but the lead driver is swerving here and there, trying not to leave enough room to pass."

Lentullus grinned. Prudens was just playing at this point.

"The third chariot is from the fifth gate. I think its Scauvus the Sicilian for the blues. He's got two whites and two greys. Very pretty and sleek. I think they're chosen for their speed. He doesn't seem to have an anchor horse in his team, but they're working well together anyway. He's a good length and a

half behind the other leaders and the nearest to him is another red perhaps three lengths back.”

Andros cleared his throat, took a deep swig of water from his cup and a deeper breath.

“The rest are too far back to make a play for victory. It’s all going to be between Sura, Prudens and Scauvus. There’s no sign of a white until far back in the crowd. The dust cloud’s kicking up strong, but they’re coming clear into view again as they reach the end of the spina and turn.”

He grinned. A spectator at the far side had just turned round, lifted his toga and bared his backside at the third driver. Scauvus wouldn’t have been noticed, of course, but the laughter around him showed the act had been taken in good spirits.

“They’re rounding the spina. Sura is still in the lead, but he took it quite wide. I think the outer horse on his team was vying for dominance with the inner. He’s going to have trouble between the two mares before long.”

His master nodded in the darkness, smiling. It was all decided long before the day, really, by the choices of horse, driver and vehicle, but it was still always exciting.

“Prudens has pulled a much tighter turn. His guide horse is really excellent. He’s jostling for position with Sura now. There’s trouble... they’re almost touching... but Sura has pulled out a little. It’s close now.”

Another momentary pause.

“Scauvus has made a beautiful tight turn and reclaimed almost a length from the leaders. The three are in close competition now, with the next nearest far enough back that he might as well be in a different race.”

“How’s the crowd?” Lentullus enquired, tensely.

“Mostly in good spirits, though with some bad feeling. Particularly bad among the white supporters. There’s a crowd of them not far from the carceres on the other side of the track and they’re weighed down with curse tablets they’re hurling into the riders. Some of them are waiting for the leaders, I think.”

“Ha. They’ll have to throw like Hercules himself to hit the leaders near the centre.”

“Indeed, master. The three drivers are passing us.”

Hardly necessary commentary, really, given the deafening roar from the crowd and the noise from the vehicles on the sand below.

“Now they’re coming into the turn again for the end of the first lap. Sura is close enough to see the man in white at the back of the previous lap and might pass him this time. He turns and it’s tight... tighter than last time. He’s managed to keep Prudens behind him, trapped. The positions are the same as they come into the initial straight for the second time.”

The first of the gold dolphin markers that counted off the laps tipped up, to a massive roar from the crowd.

“First lap over and nothing much has changed: the lead three are all a little closer together, but no difference in position. Again, Scauvus is pushing like mad to close with the first two and, as they pass the Emperor in his box, it’s still Sura leading by half a length, Prudens fighting him desperately for first place, and Scauvus less than a length behind them.”

He swallowed another mouthful of water quickly. It was thirsty work.

“There’s trouble for the whites, but they’ve lost anyway. Their second quadriga is pulling off without even completing a lap and making for the carceres. Looks like the outer horse is lame. He’s... yes, he’s off the track and out of the race.”

“Screw him” the blind master snapped excitedly. What about the three? Are they at the corner yet?”

Andros took a deep breath.

“As they round the far corner again, positions are the same. It’s tight, though... so tight you wouldn’t believe. Now, there’s hardly room to separate the three. Sura and Prudens are almost alongside, with Scauvus close behind. They’re putting on extra speed as they come close to our corner again.”

Lentullus nodded eagerly.

“Yes, yes. Are they here? I can’t hear the horses for all the shouting. Are they at the next turn?”

“They’re closing on it now, master. Here they come: Sura first, but his two mares are still arguing and...” his voice rose a notch. “Yes... they’ve pulled out too wide for the turn and Prudens has found the room. He’s in now, neck and neck. As they come back into our straight, it could go either way by the end of this lap!”

Something was happening in the crowd off to his left, but he kept his eyes riveted on the action just left of straight ahead.

“Scauvus is still closing. It’s so tense and overwhelming. If we’re lucky we might see all three of them jostling for first by the time they straighten out!”

But the cause of the commotion in the crowd suddenly became apparent, with a roar and screams. Half a brick, cast with anger and deadly accuracy, hurtled out from the stand, smashing into the nearest guide horse of Sura’s team. The blow was not hard enough to damage the horse, but the shock did enough. The black Armenian mare reared desperately in pain, and the entire team foundered, chaos ensuing.

Desperately, seeing what had happened, Prudens hauled on his reins and steered his chariot in so close to the spina that the wheel hub raised sparks from the stonework. In a heart-stopping moment, he pulled out past the rolling disaster that was Sura’s quadriga.

Half the crowd cheered, not entirely sure what was happening but aware that, whatever it was, Prudens was out clear now and in the lead.

But the disaster wasn’t over. Unable to swerve enough from his following position, Scaurus’ team drove straight into the former leader’s chariot, the two vehicles slamming together. Horses went down in squeals of pain, while the one wounded by the brick broke free from the trouble and galloped off ahead down the track, yanking the hapless rider straight from the wreckage of his chariot and throwing him to the sand of the arena, where it proceeded to race away, dragging the broken charioteer away by the rein-wrapped arms.

Chaos and death.

Disaster for the teams.

Financial ruin for many spectators.

But what had immediately occurred to Andros in that flash of panic as the accident began, was just how close to the track they were and the location and direction of the two chariots as they collided. A tiny mental calculation

based on the approach angles, and he was already leaping away through the crowd at the very moment Scauvus' quadriga smashed into that of Sura, running up the stands.

The great, broken wooden bulk of the chariot, borne aloft by the momentum of the crash, the yoke sheared away and freeing the poor horses, hurtled through the air and into the stands.

Lentullus turned to his sightless friend.

"Where's the boy. What's going on?"

A whistling noise and growing rush of air was the last thing either of them ever heard.

Andros, his heart still racing, watched the panicked and miserable crowd filing out of the circus. In the chaos following the fatal crash that had demolished part of the stands and killed or injured more than a dozen people, nobody thought to question the young Greek slave as he made his way to the raised seating area where senator Paulinus sat.

The ageing man had barely raised an eyebrow, given the scale of his losses today, as he paid the young man with a large leather bag of coins. After all, the boy was Lentullus' slave, and had the legal chitty.

Andros grinned.

Life was going to be rather nice. By the time the chaos was under control, and he was missed, he would be at Ostia boarding the first ship bound for home.

And he'd be going home richer than the Gods.

"Bless you, Prudens the master charioteer."

How to run a latifundium

Marcus Aelius Pacutus looked out over his latifundium with a professional, practiced eye and nodded to himself.

The huge estate that covered the lower slopes of the mountains above the city of Carsulae in central Italia rolled off over the slopes, revealing seemingly endless rows of vines, each tended lovingly and carefully and renowned for their produce that went on to make some of the finest wine exported across the Empire.

The devotion of this great estate to wine had been the work of Pacutus' grandfather, a man of blinding and astounding luck who had not only survived the reign of Nero unscathed despite his noted opposition to the Emperor's policies, but had even managed to come out of it with land, money and title and the respect and support of the new Emperor.

Two and a half generations was all it had taken to turn a new vineyard into a wine variety sought after by the noble classes and sold in bars and thermopolia from Gaul to Syria. It was largely down to the soil, of course. As Columella had noted, the soil was at the heart of it all, and the soil here high in the valley in the centre of the country was rich and dark, perfect for the vine.

Some of it, of course, had come down from his father and grandfather's financial acumen. Too many latifundia had failed and been sold away because the owners invested too heavily and landed themselves in deep debt, or overstretched, or hired too many freedmen workers.

Not so on the Pacutus estate. Marcus' forefathers had been astute and wise and had carefully balanced the coffers with income and expenditure to make sure that the latter never outweighed the former.

The estates finances and income had, in fact, been in such a strong position that his father, after serving briefly as a decurion in Carsulae, had retired from public life entirely at a surprisingly young age, to live on the estate and the fortune it made.

It had come as a surprise to no one then, when his father died six years ago, that Marcus had immediately discarded his cuirass and abandoned the military tribunate to return to the estate and take control.

Marcus had new ideas, though. His father and grandfather were financially astute, yes, but they had also been weak and sympathetic people. The estate made more than enough for a nobleman to live a comfortable life, but Marcus knew it could be better still. Working the figures himself, he passed them before a friend who had worked in the treasury and who was a genius with an abacus. The simple fact was that, though the latifundium had made a fortune, it could easily have made twice as much with a little less softness and sympathy.

His nose itched, but that would go away in its own time. An itchy nose was a sign of something, he remembered hearing tell. Was it that he was coming into money? Hopefully, it would take him that inch closer to his dream of actually rolling in golden coins. He smiled.

Rubus had been the main cutback. Not the only one, but the main one. The middle-aged Gaul had begun as a slave on the farm, freed by his grandfather toward the end of his life and installed as the overseer for the

estate. His grandfather and father both had prized the Gaul for his knowledge and efficiency, but they had paid him a small fortune for his work.

Stupid, given that they were both present permanently at the villa and knew damn well how to run things themselves. What a waste of money. Totting up how much money he'd saved in the five years since he drove Rubus from the estate made his palm tingle. Enough to buy a new caravan of wagons, or to perhaps put down a payment on a barge; all things that would expand the growing empire of Pacutus.

Personal attention had changed everything. The money had started to pile up so rapidly he couldn't have spent it if he'd tried. He didn't, of course. He was too busy making the money to spend any of it.

Of course, there were days when the work was harder than others, such as today. Some days the slaves were especially lazy and stupid and he had to expend precious energy with the whip, or even use his own, soft, white hands to labour on the estate. After all, it was better to do some things oneself than to rely on unreliable wasters like the Numidian carpenter or the other slaves that had been given the task of building the arbour across the patio outside the villa.

It would be lovely when complete. The beautiful, decorative patio claimed an unrivalled view of the estate with its rolling slopes, and of the majestic peaks that towered over it. He smiled as he took it in once again. It was nice now, but when he could look at it from this very spot shaded by the timber structure with vines growing across it, laden with succulent grapes.

He would have to start thinking about a wife soon. He would need a son, of course, to pass the estate to. It certainly wasn't going to that soft, podgy cousin of his that talked endlessly of the new Jewish religion that Nero had forbidden and urged him at every social engagement to free his slaves and hire free workers. The moron.

No. A son it would have to be. Then his son could sit on this very patio under the arbour, surrounded by the finest grapes in central Italia and watching his slaves work.

No sign of the slaves now, though, as the sun began to descend. His arms ached, but then they would, after such a day. He sighed as he scanned the vineyards once more from the patio viewpoint.

He wondered whether he'd spent more of the afternoon beating the damn wastrels or hammering the nails himself? Probably beating. He did seem to have beaten them a lot today; more than usual, and he would be the first to admit that he beat them a lot anyway.

But they were slaves. More slaves could always be found cheaply. They didn't have to be clever or powerful to dig a hole or pick grapes. Slaves were worth less than the soil they worked. Beating them was natural; the very order of things.

That, of course, was why it had come as such a shock when they had turned on him. The Judean girl had been the first to use the whip. He'd been so surprised at the turn of events while the two Numidians held him down, that he'd barely noticed the pain as they flayed the skin from his back with the barbed lash. He'd not screamed. Why would he? They were only slaves.

He really wished he could scratch his nose, but his arms were tied fast to the crossbar of the hastily manufactured crucifix. There had been some

intelligent irony among them, in the end. They'd crucified him using the very timber and nails he'd been beating them for misusing.

A raven cawed in a nearby tree, watching him with anticipation. He could swear it was almost drooling as it watched its meal start to sag and fade.

Marcus Aelius Pacutus looked out over his latifundium with a professional, practiced eye and nodded to himself.

Time was up.

A Reading

Spurius Bulba took a deep breath and swallowed nervously. Glancing up surreptitiously he eyed the waiting folk. The handsome, chiselled features of the central figure, master of this grand palace and employer of unfortunate wretches, watched expectantly, his advisors gripping their togas in anticipation. Spurius swallowed again.

It had not been an easy morning.

The very first thing he had seen when he opened his eyes was the image of Castus the moneylender, his face a mixture of violent anger and hungry amusement. He'd been meaning to pay Castus back all month but, as was always the case, whatever money came into his hands seemed to evaporate whenever he passed by one of the thermopolia where men gathered to play dice. The dice didn't like him, and his few satisfied customers had joked that he was safe anyway, since his entire being was anathema to chance itself.

Castus had been surprisingly accommodating. The Syrian thug with him broke the fourth and fifth fingers on Spurius' left hand, which is the most excruciating way to wake up, but also allowed him an extra week to pay. It could have been worse, for sure.

Donning his tunic and quickly splashing water over his face and his ever-unruly hair with the bald patch that allowed the shining dome of his intellect to rise through like the Capitol, he quickly rifled around his table. The only furniture in his small room apart from the rickety bed and the washstand, the table was a permanent dumping ground for anything and everything. Broken wine pots mingled with unwashed underwear and the lead curse tablets he kept just in case. He'd been tempted to use one on Castus, but had relented, as they were costly, and it seemed like throwing good money after bad. Somewhere on the table, amid the chaos, a former meal had gone mouldy as the general reek announced, but he wasn't over-keen to excavate and locate the errant fungus.

The search turned up, along with unspeakable things, seven copper asses. Seven asses! It wouldn't even buy a morning snack. Grasping the coins as though they might flee and reaching for his work bag, Spurius had left his room, hurried down the grubby, badly-maintained stairwell and out of the insula into the street.

Jerusalem. Not the nicest city in the world, but one of the few that would have him. In the past eight years since he had left Rome via Ostia at high speed with bruisers chasing him intent on extracting blood, he had spent brief times in almost every great city of the empire.

Narbo had been nice for a while until the debts mounted up and he'd had just enough left to take ship, the moneylenders baying after him like hounds. Tarraco had been more civilized still, but he'd soon been found out and exiled by men of import. He'd tried Syracuse for a time, but the moneylenders there were shrewd and shunned him. Epirus had made him shudder. Everyone had been far too clever and pleasant. He'd felt like a turd in a bathhouse his entire stay, and it remained unique as the only city he had ever left voluntarily.

Athens had been pretty nice, despite the fact that a notorious lover of boys had taken a liking to him and followed him around, trying to get into his breeches. Still, a heavy bet on the track races there had seen him fleeing north on a stolen donkey with no possessions but the tunic he wore and the tools of his 'trade'. Byzantium had been next and, unfortunately, a very similar story to Athens, though without the constant danger of rape. Tarsus had been brief but dangerous, with knife-wielding maniacs, the usual blood-hungry moneylenders and customers, and an almost fatal bout of something that caused the world to fall out of his bottom.

And so he'd ended up in Jerusalem at the arse end of the empire, where rebellious Jews spent their entire time badgering, corrupting, knifing and denouncing the occupying Roman forces. After the first week he'd even given up bothering to comment when they spat on his feet. It wasn't as though he was going to get any dirtier, after all.

The street opened up before him that morning with its usual commotion, smells and noise. It was as though someone had ripped the roof off the Cloaca Maxima and filled it with people and stalls. Uniformly horrible. He rubbed his hands in anticipation, wincing as the two broken fingers, bound together with a torn strip of tunic, moved painfully. When this morning was over, he would have enough money to either pay Castus off, or buy a horse with plenty of change and get the hell out of this shit hole. Not both. The latter was starting to sound good, though. Alexandria might make a nice change.

Strolling down the street, he smiled. The initial bad start to the morning was clearly just that. His luck was changing. One of the stalls at the roadside was busy packing away after the morning rush. The proprietor was head-down in his bags, packing the remnants away, but had left a loaf of bread hanging from the hook at the stall's corner. Spurius leaned to his left as he walked and picked up speed. As he reached the stall, he lunged out with his hand, unseen by the stall's owner, and grasped for the bread.

The owner's son, a tall boy with a sour face, swiped the bread out from under him, glaring, and Spurius found suddenly that his balance was off. Momentum carried his hand into open air where the bread had been, his feet seemed to do some complicated dance and moments later he was face down in the straw and horse shit by the side of the road with two bakers laughing at him.

Hurriedly he picked himself up, dusting off the worst of the crud, and gathered his bag in his arms, clutching it tight. A quick glance up failed to improve his mood.

As a haruspex, a diviner of truths in the entrails of beasts, Spurius was expected to be staid, sombre, sober, and above all, accurate. However, since he had 'learned' his craft, such as it was, from a drunken lunatic with a tendency to dribble, a beard that things lived in and the most curious smells, skin afflictions and twitches, all for the price of a place to stay for a month, he was not entirely convinced of his pedigree. The man had claimed to be an Etruscan of age-old lineage. What, in fact, he appeared to be was a drunk, a fraud, and quite possibly a carrier of disease.

Certainly Spurius had learned a few things from the old man. While he may have had all the talents of prognostication of a jar of fish sauce, he knew the jargon and the basic principals and it was astounding in the past decade

just how often Spurius had made accurate predictions based partially on the signs around him and partially on a one in two chance of being right.

Above, three blackbirds flew in formation. Spurius knew that this could be interpreted in numerous ways, and the most positive (the one you always told clients) was that it represented the Capitoline Triad and that Jupiter, Juno and Minerva were watching over them with a kindly eye. It was how Spurius took it for himself this morning, which made it all the more poignant and irritating when a great bird of prey hurtled out of the blue and snatched one away, scattering the other two. Clearly not a good omen in anybody's book, let alone that of the Etruscan mystics.

Grumbling to himself, Spurius strode on. The one thing he was sure of was there was no more lucrative place in the Empire to practice haruspicy. The diviners of omens so favoured by the Roman masters were shunned and loathed by the Jews, and most reputable haruspices would go nowhere near the place for fear of their lives. That meant that the noble Romans of Judea would pay highly for the talents of even the lowest pond-life if they knew how to open a goat.

His appointment at the palace was at the hour before noon and he'd planned on spending the morning begging for coins in front of the great temple so that he could afford to have his robe washed and perhaps a bath and a shave. Instead, he had woken late and rudely to broken fingers, dung and ill omens. Still, he would be at the palace on time and it was not a neat, pristine white augur the client was paying for; it was a reading.

The best things came in shabby packages, as he regularly failed to convince people.

Turning a corner, he made for the animal trader. His employer had informed him yesterday that Lebbeus had put a sheep aside for him and the cost would be deducted from his fee. Bah!

He'd tried to persuade the client that all that was really required was an egg. Divination was just as easy with an egg. And so much easier to fake, too. Who the hell knew what the future held by looking into the way the yolk separates from the white. Oh he'd tried to actually make sense of what he'd been told many times, but the thing was: the liver of a goat was a powerful looking item, and people could believe in it as a symbol. Crack an egg, however, and people just stared at you. Not Etruscans, of course, 'cause they would know the truth of it. But to a Roman, and to Spurius particularly, an egg was an egg was an egg. And an egg was cheap.

But the sheep had been a requirement and the trader had the unfortunate animal penned carefully aside to keep it pure.

Spurius rolled his eyes. As though the future was ever going to be clearer because of what the sheep had been doing the night before. Ridiculous. But then if the rituals were to be followed to the letter, he himself should be bathed, shaved, sober, of respectful attitude and, above all, not a charlatan with a three day hangover and halitosis that would help anaesthetise the sheep. He was also supposed to have fasted last evening instead of eating the greasy food of Bothus the Syrian and drinking cheap wine.

Grumbling, he strode into the emporium and marked the trader's ledger, collecting the sheep on the way out. Master Lebbeus looked at him the whole time as though he might have just crawled out of a sewer, but Spurius

didn't really care. Grasping the leash of the sheep, he all-but dragged it from the place, swearing as it took the time to carefully manure on his foot.

Outside the store, he tethered the sheep and took a moment to prepare himself. From his bag he drew the fringed robe, patched and darned in many places, and the slightly bent conical hat. He hated them. Wearing them both, he felt like one of those Aegyptian obelisks. But it was expected. Obviously the liver would hardly reveal anything to him if he weren't to dress like a deranged childrens' entertainer.

The journey along the long street to the palace was horrible and tortuous, spat on twice by Jews who repeatedly jeered at his apparel. Tightly, in his free hand, he clutched the bag that contained his knives and tools, wondering whether it would be sacrilege to open one of the jeering locals and divine something from his liver.

But the jeering and the spitting was only the start.

Omens came thick and fast as he walked, each one annoying him more than the previous.

The sudden, almost explosive backwash from a drain cover that soaked his shin was hardly a good omen. The only cloud in the wide blue firmament, a few inches across at most, managing to hover in front of the sun and put him in the shade while every other person in the street remained brightly lit? That was clearly saying something. The thrown bucket of slops that hit the sheep, staining its pristine white coat with brown sludge? The dog that tripped him up and then took an unhealthy interest in the sheep until he managed to deliver a heavy kick to its testicles? It all had the unhealthy aura of a campaign of hate against him by the Gods.

Certainly, if it were not such a lucrative commission, he'd have gone home and hidden under the bed.

As he reached the end of the street and stared up at the palace steps, he'd glanced down at the frightened, bedraggled and shit-covered animal and realised there was no hope in hell of him getting away with that. The client would dismiss him without payment. No one could ritually sacrifice a shit-soaked sheep! Racking his brains, he looked around, his eyes alighting with glee on the butcher that occupied the last building on the left. The sheep that was hanging in his window was still white and pristine, though dead of a snapped neck and about to be bled according to their law. With a grin, he jogged across to the shop.

Ten minutes of tense negotiating resulted in his leaving the shop with a dead white sheep while the butcher looked after Fuscus, as he'd named the poor animal for its new colour. The promise he'd made to return with full payment was genuine, though. While Spurius was far from a good man in most respects, he had never been a violent one, nor wished harm to an innocent creature. In fact, he'd always hated the sacrificial part. He would have ample leftover in his wage for this to pay the butcher, and could take little Fuscus with him when he left. The idea of arriving in Alexandria with a sheep in tow brought a smile to his face.

A practiced confidence trickster, Spurius set his jaw square and allowed a serious, imperious look to fall across his features. Striding across the square, he cradled the sheep in his arms, using his hand hidden beneath the beast to rhythmically push, giving the poor thing the outward appearance of breathing.

With a sombre gait, he climbed the steps of the great palace. He was expected, and the guards merely gave him a cursory look, rolled their eyes and let him pass, wrinkling their noses in disgust. A minor functionary met him in the atrium and enquired as to why he was carrying the sheep. With a masterful combination of hand movements and ventriloquism, Spurius managed to make the beast appear to lift its head a little and make a small plaintive noise. He rattled out a simple explanation of needing to keep the sheep pure and out of the street's filth, which seemed to satisfy the small, portly man.

And so he'd been brought to the place of divination and had had a few minutes to prepare before the arrival of the crowd. More careful planning followed, as he moved the altar so that his customers would be looking into the sun and the whole thing would be easier. Needing only one hand for the knife, he arranged the body on the altar and used his other hand to jiggle it around as though he were restraining a mobile beast, wincing occasionally as his broken fingers suffered a knock.

Then the client had arrived with his people. He had called for quiet and commanded that Spurius go on with the rituals, squinting to see the detail through the bright sunlight. The haruspex had announced in a clear, sombre, and sacred tone that a flight of geese that flew across the palace roof were auspicious, so long as the reading was immediate, and no delay would be brooked by the Gods. The client frowned, but nodded, unhappy that he would clearly be getting less for his money than he had originally expected.

In a flurry, pretending to let the animal buck a little, Spurius jiggled the sheep's body, lurching once or twice, and then drawn his blade across the neck, grateful that the beast was so freshly killed that the blood flowed freely, and trying not to let them see the fact that it already had a broken neck. Collecting the dish full of blood, he examined it.

The thick liquid sloshed as he held it and then, for the very first time in ten years of the practice, he saw the future in the blood. His client would be infamous for all time for the events of this very day! His name would be spoken in hushed, disapproving tones.

Spurius lurched back and had to fight not to drop the dish. Rattled and breathing heavily, he placed it on the small remaining space on the altar and took up his knife. He barely even heard himself intoning the words as he began to open the beast and cut away the liver, his heart thumping so fast that he worried he might collapse.

Trying to look professional and not rattled, he withdrew the liver and glanced down.

He dropped the liver into the open cavity in shock and had to hurriedly retrieve it while his audience were squinting in the bright sun to see what was going on. The liver was talking to him in ways he'd always imagined a real haruspex would experience. Suddenly he could see things in the patterns on it. He could picture the shape of things to come. His eyes were drawn inexorably over the top of the palace roof and to the great Temple of Solomon beyond. Why him? Why now?

He swallowed again. No, it had not been an easy morning.

Straightening, he thrust his blood-coated arms up and fixed Lucius Pontius Pilatus, Prefect of Judaea, square in the eye as he lied through his teeth.

“The omens are good, my lord. Jupiter smiles on your rule here, Juno will grant peace to this corner of the empire, and Minerva will grant you the wisdom to follow the most noble of paths.”

Pontius Pilatus, his expression suggesting that he was less than convinced with the performance, turned to his adjutant.

“Very well. Tell the Sanhedrin that I’ll authorise it. Nail him up in the morning and I’ll have nothing more to do with the whole affair.”

As a functionary dropped a small pouch of coins into Spurius’ hand, Pilatus turned to his friends and ushered them away to prepare for the noon meal.

Leaving everything for the slaves to tidy away, Spurius, shaken to the core, grasped his knife and tools and hurried from the palace, down the steps and the hell away from this place.

Haruspicy gave him the creeps.

Time to make a living from gambling... or maybe sheep farming.

On the way across the square to collect Fuscus, he paused to throw the abominable conical hat into the fountain in disgust.

Exploratores

Tiberius Claudius Maximus reined in his horse and sat on the low ridge, scanning the horizon. Flies buzzed around him in the summer heat and his mail shirt sat uncomfortably warm and heavy, made all the more so by the large oval shield hanging on his back.

The ridge was low; less than two hundred feet above the level of the valleys on either side. To his left; the west, a huge plain stretched out, hemmed in distantly by hazy grey mountains that shimmered in the heat, marching away toward Sarmizegethusa and the camp of the emperor Trajan and the four legions that had crossed the Danubius at the summer's beginning. To the other side, a long valley less than a mile wide stretched off to the north and into the hazy distance.

"Quiet!" he said, his voice low, but carrying a gravitas that silenced the four troopers who sat astride their own mounts ten yards back, sunning themselves.

"Sir? You see something?"

Maximus frowned, ignoring the question, his eyes focusing on tiny movements along the valley. One of dozens of carefully-selected scout riders sent out with patrols, he was sharp-eyed, battle-hardened, an experienced veteran and, above all, capable of thinking on his feet and controlling any situation with instinctive command.

Something was clearly wrong. None of his men seemed to have noticed, but Maximus could see it clear as a vexillum. The collection of rude huts with straw roofs that constituted the Dacian village was quiet; too quiet and yet not quiet enough. It would be entirely understandable if the village were empty and deserted. The Roman army had smashed the forces of the Dacian king, Decebalus, at most a day's march from here. It was a simple consequence of war. The poor country dwellers fled the conflict.

Or, given the fact that no Roman forces had yet come this far east, it would be equally reasonable to find the village living its normal life, farmers tending the fields, dogs barking in the enclosures and children playing in the stream.

But no.

There were three figures only that he had seen in the last ten minutes. Three figures; all burly men. They could easily be farmers, but they wandered in and out of the huts, performing no normal tasks. They were a sham. They were there to give the impression of an occupied village, and a sharp-eyed man had to wonder why.

"There's trouble afoot, Statilius. This valley is waiting for something."

"Sir?" the other riders walked their horses forward to the commander's position.

"That village is not what it seems. It may be a trap."

Statilius shared a look with one of the other riders and then shrugged.

"Then hadn't we best get back to the camp and inform the officers, sir? Come back with the entire Seventh and flood the valley with men?"

Maximus shook his head slowly.

"No. There can't be too many of them or they'd have defences prepared. If we leave them long enough, they might get reinforcements.

Remember that Decebalus is still out there with the rest of his army. Prepare for action.”

One of the other men, Anakreon, a Greek by birth and a bloodthirsty bastard, nodded and unslung his shield. The other three shared another uncertain glance.

“Sir, if it’s a trap, the five of us charging them could be bloody suicidal! We don’t know what to expect.”

Maximus smiled wryly. “I’m just as happy as you at the thought of riding into a possible ambush, Statilius, but the fact remains that we’re the only unit within at least eight or nine miles of here. If we run back to the camp the Dacians could move on and disappear into the mountains; then we’d never find them.”

Perhaps two thousand of the defenders had managed to flee the brutal siege of Sarmizegethusa two days ago and Trajan, ever pro-active and forceful, had immediately organised scouting units to track down the survivors. To leave enemies alive, particularly with their leader still free, could lead to endless difficulty in the smooth annexation of the territory. The emperor had made it clear. After the first war, when the Dacians broke the terms of the peace, Trajan had stated his intention to invade their land and not to stop until the mountains of Dacia bowed to Rome and stayed that way.

Tracking the survivors from Sarmizegethusa had been all but impossible. The summer had been warm and dry and these mountains and plains were grassy and easy terrain. No mud or undergrowth would betray the passage of a large group of men. After two days of scouring the hills and valleys, this was the first sign of anything out of the ordinary. How could they leave now?

“We have to check it out.”

“Sir? Perhaps we should just shadow them as they move on.”

Maximus sighed. He could understand their reluctance, but any moment he was going to have to lay down the law.

“We can’t shadow them” he explained patiently. “We’re sat in bright sunlight on a hilltop, Orosius. If I can see them moving about in the village, you can be damn sure they’ve seen us. We need to check it out, and that’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

He glanced around at the four riders. Anakreon was a born fighter; a huge, bearded man who looked more like a bear; far too large for the horse that bore him, really. Statilius was argumentative, but far from mutinous. He would do exactly as ordered and knew well how to handle himself in a fight. Orosius may not be the sharpest pugio in the armoury, but he was a solid trooper with a good sword arm. That just left Senna. Young, thoughtful and quiet, the lanky trooper had carried himself well at Sarmizegethusa, but was largely untried otherwise. No competition, really.

“Senna? I want you to stay here on the hilltop, but get back among those trees so you can’t be seen. Watch what happens and if there’s real trouble, ride hard for camp and let the emperor know what occurred.”

The young man nodded respectfully.

“That means it’s down to the four of us. There are about a dozen huts down there, several barns, and four copses of trees. That means absolutely anything could be waiting for us. There could be three of them or three hundred. Opinions? Concerted front or scattered skirmish?”

The huge Thracian scratched his beard.

“Too dangerous to split up. Doesn’t matter if it takes us longer to find what we’re looking for, whatever it might be, but we have to be able to mutually defend.”

A chorus of nods confirmed the decision.

“Agreed. There’s a wooden bridge over the stream, but the whole thing’s narrow enough to jump. We ride hard, cross near the bridge and move like a harvest through the village. I want at least one of those men alive for questioning.”

“And if there’s a thousand men hiding in caves nearby?”

“Then we meet again in Elysium to lick our wounds. Come on.”

Kicking his heels into the horse, Maximus with his three companions rode down the slope toward the narrow valley, while young Senna disappeared from sight.

There was something glorious, even in the face of tremendous danger or the threat of the unknown, about charging downhill with spears out and trusted companions at your sides. Maximus found himself grinning wolfishly as he raced through the thick grass.

They had already covered a third of the distance when the alarm went up in the village. Chaos erupted among the thatched hovels and Maximus was both heartened and surprised to see that, despite the call, only perhaps eight or nine men appeared, arming themselves.

“We’ve got ‘em!” he called out above the rush of wind and the thunder of hooves.

The charge was always a dizzying blur. Not the standard tactic of a Roman cavalry unit and thrilling when experienced, the distance passed in the blink of an eye, drowned in adrenaline and the pounding of the blood. Before they had time to think, the four men had reached the small stream running to the west of the village. Orosius crossed the bridge, the horse’s hooves thundering on the timber, while the other three jumped the narrow defile with ease, racing on into the settlement.

With practiced efficiency, the cavalymen drew back and cast their spears, each having marked a man. Two throws fell short, though Anakreon and Statilius found their targets, the spears punching through the Dacians’ unarmoured chests. One fell to the floor, thrashing around and trying to pull the spear out, mortally wounded yet defiant in defeat. The other was thrown back and lounged there, dead yet propped up by the shaft that stuck into the turf behind him.

Four men ran on toward them as they closed, drawing their swords. Three others took one look at the attackers and turned, running for one of the small copses dotted around the landscape.

A Dacian warrior, for all his lack of discipline and armour, was a formidable foe, as the armies of Trajan had discovered these past five years. The whole design of the standard legionary helmet was being reworked and re-manufactured with a reinforced cross-rib over the bowl to protect from the overhand blows with their dreadful weapons.

The falx, a two-handed long, curved sword wielded with the point forward, had proved most effective when brought down upon a legionary, invariably cleaving him in two, scything through the helmet as though it were made of linen.

As the Romans hurtled into their enemy, swords swinging as they closed, Orosius learned to his cost the second dreadful use of the falx. The huge, braided warrior who was running toward him ducked and swung the long concave blade with all his might, removing the front legs of the horse half way up their length. Rider and beast both went down in a screaming mess, colliding with the barbarian. Orosius died unnoticed by his comrades, the horrifying weapon buried deep in his back, slicing through ribs, spine and organs. The defender, however, had fared little better, his chest crushed under the weight of the horse and, after delivering the final blow to his Roman enemy with incredible fortitude, he collapsed onto his back and breathed his last.

Anakreon managed to manoeuvre his horse out of the way of a similar horrible blow, sweeping down with his long cavalry blade and neatly decapitating the Dacian, while crying out some blood-curdling curse in Greek and wheeling to see who else needed help.

Statilius was locked in desperate combat with one of the two remaining warriors in the village centre, their blades ringing off and grating along one another with spine-tingling noises. There was already a large chunk missing from the Roman's large shield, mute evidence of the first blow that had been well delivered but better defended.

Maximus, an expert in the saddle even from a young age, raced on to his target and, as the man prepared to sweep at the horse's legs, the cavalry officer threw himself forward over the beast's neck and swept down with his blade, knocking the falx aside and riding over the man, hooves smashing bones and pulping innards.

Sparing barely a glance for Maximus, Anakreon rode across to give his other beleaguered companion a hand.

Moments later it was over. Eight bodies lay in the open space between the huts, only one Roman and one equine. Maximus turned and shaded his eyes, squinting in the direction the three fleeing warriors had taken. There was something odd about that. Why run, leaving their companions to fight? They had to be protecting something important; and if there was anything important enough worth protecting, the emperor would want to see it.

"Three others ran into those woods."

His companions turned to look for the three fleeing barbarians but, as they did, Maximus' attention was drawn to a sudden sharp intake of breath. His head snapping round, he was shocked and horrified to see the blood-soaked point of a Roman spear protruding from Statilius. The Dacian who had been impaled with an initial throw but left to die had, miraculously and through some sheer feat of will, managed to pull the spear from his chest and hurl it from his prone position, his shot true and strong.

"My own spear!" With a look of baffled disbelief, the cavalryman slid from the saddle and fell to the ground, the shaft shattering beneath him.

Anakreon bellowed a howl of rage and trotted his horse the dozen or so steps to the prone warrior, slashing down with his sword repeatedly and carefully, so as not to deliver a single killing blow, but to remove appendages and leave painful slices.

As the Dacian lay on the floor, thrashing the stumps of his limbs and shrieking, the hulking Greek spat on him and rode back to his commander.

"Bastards!"

Maximus gave him a grim nod.

“Come on. Let’s find out what they’re hiding.”

The pair turned, sparing a last glance for the two fallen companions who would lie unburied and pecked at by pests. It was no way for a brave man to make the final journey. With deep breaths, they rode off after the three men.

The rear of the village was an array of corn fields and the tracks of the fugitives, leaving broken ears of corn snapped and trampled, was clear enough that a child could follow them. With the advantage of saddle height, the pair began to ride through the corn, following the trail.

Perhaps half way across the field, Maximus reach across and tapped his companion and the pair hauled on their reins.

“What’s wrong here?”

“I dunno, sir? Path’s clear enough to me.”

“Precisely.” Maximus frowned. “There were a dozen places they could have run where they would make it to woodland, but they choose to run across the only field that would openly display their tracks?”

“Perhaps they panicked?”

Maximus shook his head. “I don’t think so. These men had a purpose. Come on.”

Carefully now, their horses plodding on with interminable slowness, the two continued across the field. Suddenly, with a start, Maximus held his hand up.

“There. Can you see?”

Anakreon frowned and squinted into the hazy sunlight, chaff floating in the air and the smell of honey and wheat in his nose.

“No. What?”

Maximus pointed forward and then off to his left. The huge Greek raised his eyebrows.

“Bugger me. That was subtle.”

The heavy tracks continued forward toward the woodland, but, barely visible, a second trail veered off to the left, back toward the stream. Whoever had recently passed that way had trodden very lightly to try and disguise his path.

“What now, sir?”

Maximus frowned.

“Two went on while one went left. Without wanting to give you the shitty end of the stick, my friend, you’re more equipped to handle two than I am.”

Anakreon grinned and nodded.

“One for each hand: just how I like it. Meet you back at the village?”

“I hope so. Fortuna go with you.”

“And you.”

The two men clasped hands briefly and then separated, following the diverging trails.

After less than a minute, Maximus reached the edge of the corn field, his friend lost to sight in the distance. As he rode from the crop and out onto the grassy verge of the stream, he noted with interest the one, gnarled old tree that stood proud from the low bank. The well-concealed shape of a pair of shoulders was just visible around the sides.

“Come out and I’ll consider sparing you.”

There was a pregnant pause and finally the warrior rose from his crouch and walked around the side of the tree. A huge, bearded man with a long, strong face and an expensive felt cap, he was not the average warrior. Most of the Dacians fought like the Celts; naked or in rough clothes, furs and leather. This man, however, wore a bronze scale shirt that was almost concealed by the outer fur garment. A simple circlet held back the bulk of his wild, thick hair, and his stance was that of a nobleman. There was something familiar about him.

"I need information on the disposition of the remaining Dacian forces. If you comply with me, I will see to it that you live."

The man shook his head. In a thick, deep, gravelly voice, he addressed his pursuer in passable Latin.

"Better to die now as a free man than to live in chains."

Maximus shrugged.

"The emperor wants slaves. You're no different from the rest."

But he was. A flash of memory. He'd seen that face before. Twice even. Once at Tapae four years ago when the two opposing leaders had met to end the previous conflict and then again, recently, rising proud above the ramparts of Sarmizegethusa as Rome prepared to end the reign of...

"Decebalus."

The man took a deep breath.

"I am King in my mountains. I will not be dragged through the streets of Rome for the glory of your emperor."

Before Maximus could do anything to prevent it, the dethroned king produced a short, curved blade with an expensive gilded hilt and drew it across his neck, slicing through muscle, arteries and windpipe.

With a defiant rictus, the air whistling from his neck and a spray of crimson jetting out onto the grass, Decebalus, last king of Dacia, cast the soaked dagger to the ground at Maximus' feet. The Roman officer slumped slightly in the saddle and shook his head as the king closed his eyes with deliberate slowness and slowly crumpled, the life going out of him as his crashed to the ground.

"I'm sure the emperor will be equally happy with your head, o king. A wasted gesture, sadly."

He stared down at the body. The emperor had sent out the 'exploratores' units to search for a massed force of Dacian survivors preparing for another last stand. The truth seemed to be somewhat different. This was what Decebalus' defiance had brought his people: small groups of fugitives fleeing through fields and hiding in farms. The conquest was truly over.

With a sigh, he drew his knife.

Perhaps thirty minutes later, Anakreon strode into open grassland from the cornfield. Covered in blood, one of his arms hung limp at his side and his horse was missing, but he bore a wide grin.

"Wondered if you were alright, sir? You never made it back to the village."

He wandered across to his commander, who was seated on a rock by the water, his cloak bundled up to create a bag next to him. The big Greek frowned as he took in the blood-soaked grass and the headless body.

"Do tell."

Wearily, Maximus lifted the heavy makeshift bag and passed it over. The bottom was black and glistening wet; grisly trophy that would end a war. A prize beyond imagining for a common soldier.

“I think Trajan is going to be happy with us, Anakreon.”

With a pinch of salt

The corridor was quiet and dark as Melicos pounded along it, his sandals flapping on the decorative marble floor, his way lit only by small pottery oil lamps flickering on ledges placed at regular intervals. His hand tilted expertly first one way and then the other with practiced ease, balancing the elegant silver platter with its succulent dish as he raced around corners, his expensive, sauce-spattered tunic wafting around him.

It was the lot of a slave, not a freedman, to spend his time running to keep his master happy but Melicos felt no shame at such behaviour. He had received his manumission some ten years ago at the behest of the glorious emperor Claudius Caesar and had remained in his former slave position gratefully, receiving a considerable wage, a small apartment of his own and a number of other benefits, not the least of which was living and working in the great Palatine complex.

The former slave had impressed the deformed, barely-audible and yet incredibly astute and careful Emperor from the very beginning with his innovative and masterful ability with food. Even as a slave he had gone from being a simple cook among a dozen others to running the kitchen in those first couple of years. Since his manumission and being given free rein to hire his own staff, however, his kitchen had become famous: the envy of Rome's noble classes. Invitations to the emperor's parties were sought after by the greatest generals and richest patricians. All for Melicos' simple expertise with sauces and combinations.

Carefully juggling the platter, spinning it expertly with his little finger to keep it balanced, Melicos bellowed an order as he ran and the door at the end of the corridor swung open as he neared it, granting access to the Imperial apartments.

On he ran, into the decorative entrance hall with its frescos of elegant parkland, lakes and bridges, swans and geese, colonnaded villas and trees. Deftly, he jumped a small table. He could have navigated the route from the kitchen to Claudius' triclinium in the pitch darkness without spilling a drop, he'd done it so many times.

The smell of Melicos' signature dish wafted after him as he ran.

His sauce cooks were all experts in their field. Prutucus had been chief chef to the governor of Narbonensis before his fame spread and Melicos sent him an offer he couldn't refuse. Banathes was a Syrian who had risen to fame with his own chain of thermopolia in Emesa. He was often a little heavy on the spices, but was learning to temper his work for the more jaded palate of Rome. Latiades was a find: a Greek who could work wonders with mulsum.

It had been something of a wrench letting go of control over the sauces, but Melicos simply didn't have time these days to work in as much detail as he used to, having to monitor the work of three dozen kitchen staff in an almost constant flurry. At least they were the three best sauce cooks to be found in the entire Empire.

Ha! He laughed bitterly at the thought as he rounded another corner, slapping along into a wide corridor with bright windows that dazzled with sunlight, fading the beautiful painted griffins on the far wall.

One of the prized suilli, coated with his special sauce of mixed garlic, sea-salt, black pepper, reduced cream and crushed poppy seeds, rolled off

the pile and, with a move that took more dexterity than any gladiator could ever hope to achieve, Melicos dipped and came up running still, the precious cargo rolling back into place, caught once more by the silver dish.

Claudius had always loved his suilli, but since that day that Melicos had perfected his sauce recipe, the emperor had refused to eat them in any other fashion, demanding the dish at least three times each week. It had become a little repetitive and dull for the head chef, but now, with his three sauciers, he could farm out the most irritating tasks, and the pride in his famed dish made any trouble worthwhile. Claudius had forbidden the staff from allowing the recipe out of the Palatine kitchens, and visitors were rarely treated to the delicacy, unless the emperor wished to tease someone.

The meal had been in progress for almost half an hour. Melicos redoubled his speed. He just simply had to get the dish there in time!

Another door opened in response to a shout, and he pelted into the main residential area, the sounds of muffled conversation drifting back through the doorways, backed by the music of a masterful trio.

Melicos pinched the bridge of his nose as he ran. He couldn't afford to mess this up. The emperor wasn't a person given to extremes of violence, unlike his predecessor, but even he would have trouble here, and Agrippina would be harsh to say the least.

Her attitude toward the kitchen staff had been made abundantly clear in her first month on the Palatine, following her wedding and accession. It had come to her attention that rats had been spotted in the kitchen and stores of the palace. Her violent outbursts and rabid demands that every brick of the kitchens, stores and servants' quarters, well over a hundred rooms and passages in all, be cleaned by hand and washed down with vinegar and exterminators be brought in to deal with the vermin.

Ridiculous. Rats were ever present. The lady of the Palatine could demand whatever she wished, but there would always be rats in the lower levels. They were a fact of life, like birds or sunsets or slaves.

And thus, inadvertently, it had been Agrippina that had caused all of this, thought Melicos as he ran, gritting his teeth. Years now of scrubbing damp, decayed brick, and leaving out traps, hiring burly charlatans who would come with a box, display a dead rat they probably brought with them, collect their cash and leave. All because the lady Agrippina detested rodents so much she would turn the Palatine inside out to deal with them.

And in those years it had become apparent that she held the staff in little more esteem than she did the rats, though this disgust and enmity was mutual, he had to admit. Whatever the emperor saw in her, none of the staff could understand. And as for her obnoxious brat of a boy...

The voices were loud now and the music almost present. Melicos came to a halt in the vestibule and paused to recover his breath. No matter the urgency, one did not burst into the emperor's presence at a run, heaving in gasps of air. A half minute would be enough to compose himself, straighten his tunic, and round the corner to present the dish to Claudius and his guests.

He could only hope he was still in time. The dish of suilli smelled succulent and appetising, much as the last one had.

The one that had been delivered half an hour ago.

The one with the 'special sauce'.

There would be an investigation as to how the rat poison ended up on the delicate mushrooms. Melicos could trace the chain of events in his mind clearly enough. The last exterminators they had in were a real haphazard lot with no sense of decorum or order. One of them, probably the Gaul with the disturbing squint, would have left the poison on the shelf while he worked and forgot to collect it afterwards.

Banathes, the Syrian saucier, would have reached for the powdered garlic and salt and his hand inadvertently closed on the wrong jar; the poison had looked so like the garlic mix that even Melicos had had to sniff it to be sure.

Someone would die for this, certainly. Melicos just hoped it wasn't him. Poor Halotus, the emperor's taster, would have had the first taste, but he would only have had a little bite, so the poison would likely work slowly on him and give him a bad few days of digestive trouble. But eaten in bulk...

Melicos mopped his perspiring brow and took a deep breath, rounding the corner into the busy triclinium with steady breath and a carefully blank expression.

The emperor Claudius lay on his couch, lounging next to Agrippina, the witch plastered in so much white lead that she looked more like a statue of herself. Other guests, including the insidious and oily Otho, lay around listening to the soothing music, chattering away without a care in the world.

Trying to conceal his nerves, Melicos strode purposefully into the room and bowed, scanning the table.

His heart sank.

The empty silver platter stared back at him, mocking his tardiness. Halotus the taster stood at the side of the emperor's couch, gnawing on a dormouse in honey. Agrippina smiled at her husband, the white lead straining and ready to crack. Claudius was frowning, but very much alive, stroking the witch's cheek. Melicos heaved a sigh of relief and crossed the room, producing the silver dish of suilli with a flourish and sweeping away the empty platter, replacing it smoothly.

"Why Melicos" the emperor smiled. "More? You spoil me."

The chef took a deep bow, his mind racing. Perhaps the emperor had been feeling unusually generous and had shared them all around, administering a mild dose to everyone? Or perhaps this was all a mistake and Banathes had not reached for the wrong jar. Whatever the case, Claudius seemed happy.

With a smile, Melicos turned and strode across the room toward the exit.

Behind him there was a loud gurgling and rumbling, like the noises that issued from the drains of the Cloaca Maxima as it heaved and groaned under the weight of a heavy storm flow; like an archway about to collapse after a tremor; like a man's digestive system trying to cope with enough poison to kill a hundred vermin.

All conversation stopped and Melicos found that he had halted mid-stride.

The emperor's voice was shaky and a little high.

"Oh dear. I think I shat myself."

Aftermath in the Ludus

Tarentius sat up slowly.

It was still dark and he was hungry. So hungry. When was the last time he ate? Must have been before the last bout. The lanista had given them all a good solid meal of pork, bread and vegetables to help build both strength and courage for the fight. And the fight finished hours and hours ago. Sometime in the early afternoon. It must have been half a day ago; no wonder he was so ravenous.

Throwing off his scant cloth cover, he climbed off the pallet and stumbled in the darkness. He knew the layout of the ludus intimately and could easily find his way to the kitchens with his eyes shut. This late into the night, all the others would be asleep in their cots and the only lights burning would be the torches and lamps in the lanista's apartments and office. Perhaps in the kitchens too if it was more 'early' than late, the slaves preparing the gladiators' morning meal.

Shuffling with a tired gait out into the hall, he could hear the rumbling snores of Braxus the Thracian, a sound like a collapsing insula. Beyond was the familiar wheezing, whistling snore of Paris and then the strange whimpering, dog-like night noises of the two young Numidian retiarii. Even with bad direction sense, an old hand here could navigate just by the sounds.

He must have been absolutely exhausted after that last bout, to have fallen asleep early and missed the evening meal. He couldn't remember falling asleep or being shouted, but then the bastards who ran the place would hardly fall over themselves to make sure he got his meal. Even with five successful fights under his belt, he was still a slave, and any meal they didn't have to cook was money saved.

Tarentius growled as he pondered on the unfairness of the situation. One day he might emulate Spartacus and give the lanista a taste of his own lash.

After supper, though.

Grinning, he saw the flickering torchlight from the kitchen doorway as he turned the corner. Someone was busy doing food for the morning. He wondered if they had something tasty to spare?

Rounding the corner, Tarentius entered the kitchen, fixing his gaze on the young Gaulish cook and licked his desiccated, shredded lips.

"Mmmm... braaaaaiiinsssss...."

The cook fainted.

The Palmyrene Prince

Vaballathus, son of Odaenathus and Zenobia, crown prince of the Empire of Palmyra, sat impatiently on the small, highly-decorated silk stool. His four guards stood by the outer door to the chamber, armoured but denied the right to wear their weapons within the palace. It galled him, as a member of one of the most noble royal houses in the world and heir to the throne of an ancient land, to be kept waiting in the entrance chamber by a fellow independent ruler.

He sighed and rubbed his knees. The ride from Palmyra, better part of four hundred miles to the west, had been a swift, desperate and uncomfortable one, with fewer in the entourage than he would have liked, but time was of the essence and the Palmyrene army had few enough men to spare at this point.

Standing, he strode along the walls of the great guest chamber, decorated with silk and gold, murals depicting Kings of Persia from the days of antiquity; faces long forgotten stared back at him from under glittering crowns and ruffled their huge beards grandiosely.

He ground his teeth.

“Erabas? What did the lackey say when you spoke to him?”

“Sire, he said he would consult with his master and find us upon his return.”

“Who does he think I am?” snarled the young prince, kicking the elaborate stool’s leg and chipping the beautiful carving.

Erabas swallowed nervously and steeled himself.

“Respectfully, your magnificence, your mother, may she bathe in the light and magnificence of a thousand suns, did make it clear that we were to be as polite as possible. Much rides on our success.”

Vaballathus’ head snapped round angrily. No one spoke like that to the son of the great Zenobia; yet the man was right. For all his insolence, they must maintain perspective on why they were here. Palmyra was not the power it had been when they freed themselves from Rome over a decade ago. Back then, the foolish Romans had neither the wit nor the power to prevent their cessation; now, with that strict and clever bastard Aurelian in the purple, they had all but brought Palmyra to its knees again. Hammered by the legions at Immae and Emesa, the shattered remains of the Palmyrene army had drawn itself protectively around the capital, preparing to fight to the last, for that was all that was left to them.

Unless Vaballathus could persuade the Persian King to send them more men; to support their ongoing resistance to Rome.

He ground his teeth again and snarled at the guard.

“Be grateful that we are here and not at home in a time to peace. The next time you presume to dictate to me I will have you flayed and then boiled.”

“Yes, your magnificence. A thousand apologies.”

It was an empty threat, of course. There was a very real possibility that when they returned to Palmyra they would find Aurelian sitting on the throne in his mother’s palace, heating up the oil for Vaballathus and his family.

He wandered impatiently around the walls. Prizes from a hundred campaigns filled this great chamber, placed here deliberately in the waiting room to impress and intimidate visitors. Roman standards were bolted to the

wall in their dozens. No eagles, but many others, including a prized image of a long-gone emperor. There were jewelled weapons and silks and more from the peoples of the Indus to the east and a few furs, all that was worth taking from the nomad riders in the north. But Roman prizes were many.

His eyes settled once again on the most impressive and by far most grizzly of all prizes and he wandered over to examine it.

The body stood as though to attention on a wooden plinth, a post rising up from the base and entering the backside, rising to the head and forming a replacement for the man's spine. Lifeless empty hollows stared out from beneath once-noble brows. Either the man had had bulky jowls, or the head had settled a little over time.

Valerian, once Emperor of Rome, had little to say these days. Having been taken in battle by the Persian King Sapor, he had served as Sapor's footstool and mounting block for the next fifteen years until finally old age had rendered him incapable of performing menial tasks. When his bones grew too old, his muscles seized and his joints froze, Sapor had had him cut into pieces, emptied, preserved in the manner of the ancient Aegyptian Kings, and then stuffed and mounted as a palace decoration.

The Emperor Publius Licinius Valerianus Augustus stared desperately at Vaballathus with empty eyes, his jaw sagging. The decoration clearly needed re-stuffing before it sagged too much.

Vaballathus stepped back, his eyes taking in not only the ghastly emperor, but the many Roman standards, officer's helms, flags and cuirasses. He smiled for the first time since their arrival three tedious hours ago. Sapor would have helped Palmyra fight the Romans off. He would have made Aurelian eat his own lips. Sapor was a King to be reckoned with.

But Sapor had died almost two years ago, his renowned son following soon after. This new Persian King was an unknown quantity.

Oh, Bahram had sent troops initially to help his mother hold the Romans off, but they had been too few; too small a gesture, and the Persian contingent had been slain at Emesa with the rest of the Queen's army. But he could yet do so much more. It was said that Bahram modelled himself on the great Sapor; that he wanted to be Persia's next great ruler. Clearly there was only one solution: Bahram would have to send an army to save Palmyra. The Queen would repay him with riches beyond belief, and the Persians would acquire wealth and glory both. Aurelian's body would soon stand next to Valerian's... unless Bahram was kind and let them keep it in Palmyra as a prize.

That's what he would do when...

He was interrupted as the main door opened.

Four servants scurried in, one of the numerous palace officials hurrying along behind them and pausing to close the door. The servants bowed deeply to the guest before rushing across to the wall. The minor functionary in his silks and robe of office, his beard combed and intricately plaited, inclined his head respectfully and smiled.

"Forgive our interruption, eminence."

Vaballathus frowned.

"You have not come for us?"

"I regret no, sire."

The Palmyrene prince watched in confusion as the four servants grasped the sagging body of the Roman emperor, his frozen rictus vaguely comical, and hurried across the floor with it. The official bowed once more and then the five opened a previously unnoticed door at the far end of the room and passed through it carrying their strange, macabre load. Vaballathus stared at the door as it closed.

“What in the name of Baal?”

Almost as the second door closed with a quiet click, hiding the strange procession, the first door opened once again and the vizier who had first greeted them hours ago entered with a deep bow.

“Good morning once again, Prince Vaballathus. I must apologise for the delay. I have been consulting with my master.”

The prince turned and strode toward him angrily.

“And will his majesty be joining us now?” He tried to keep the irritation from his voice. Everything depended upon their success, which would require patience and a show of respect.

The vizier stepped back, giving a strange, oily smile.

“I am afraid not. His majesty is tied up with affairs of state. In the meantime, though, his majesty would very much like me to introduce you to our other visitor.”

The four guards reached for their sword hilts, remembering too late that the scabbards were empty. Vaballathus’ eyes widened as a full century of Roman legionaries stomped into the room, their hob-nailed boots clattering as they chipped the delicate marble flooring. The horn-players and standard bearers stepped to one side as their fellow soldiers surrounded the four Palmyrene guards. The centurion followed his men in and stood beside them as they came to attention in ordered rows in the hall.

A man appeared behind them in the doorway; a tall man with aquiline features and severe, iron grey hair. He wore the decorative breastplate and Hercules knot of a senior officer in the Roman army, his crimson cloak settling as he came to a halt.

“Gaius Attius Severinus at your service, Prince Vaballathus. I must say, the Emperor Aurelian is very much looking forward to meeting you.”

He smiled.

“You are looking well, highness. Let’s see if we can change that.”

Temple Trouble

(A short story set ten years before the events of Marius' Mules)

Marcus Falerius Fronto rolled over to stare into the eyes of the girl next to him. Vibia smiled back at him, her voluptuous lips framing her perfect teeth. She languished in the bed next to him, half-wrapped in light, wispy garments that did little to hide her shape and...

Fronto swallowed and his eyes bulged dangerously.

"You're a what?"

Vibia smiled in an astoundingly relaxed way to Fronto's mind.

"Relax, Marcus. I'm not actually a vestal virgin."

Fronto, still staring, allowed himself to heave a deep sigh of relief. Last night's debauchery among the taverns in the subura had left him with a dull thumping in his head, a number of gaps in his memory of the night before and an otherwise entirely unfamiliar young lady at his side. He'd been out to celebrate his assigning to Spain, where he'd join the new quaestor, taking ship from Ostia in a few days' time. And things had become a little blurred. He distinctly remembered losing a number of wagers and chasing a number of young women along the street with Geganius. The end of the night was still shrouded in mystery, though.

"Shit, girl! You can't go round saying you're a vestal. You'll get in serious trouble, and you nearly gave me a bloody heart attack."

He saw the amusement flickering in her eyes and growled.

"Where the hell are we, anyway? Last thing I remember was that little bar below the Tabularium."

Vibia's mouth split into a wide grin.

"We're in the house of the vestals, Marcus."

"What?"

Fronto shook his head. Was the girl deliberately trying to break his brain, or was he just plainly beyond simple understanding this morning?

Vibia sighed lightly.

"I'm the most unusual girl you'll ever sleep with, Marcus. I was chosen late to be one of the vestals. I'm not a girl any more, despite what they all think, but I haven't taken the vow as yet."

Fronto frowned.

"I wasn't aware there was a delay?"

"There usually isn't but they had trouble finding someone quick to replace one of the priestesses who just passed on, and I was what you might call a 'last-minute find' by the pontifex maximus. Normally they would deliberate for a lot longer, but the public opening of the temple for the festival is in two days and they need a full complement of novices and priestesses."

She grinned.

"I was on the way to the temple last night when you and your friend found me. I will be taking the vows in..." she frowned and tried to judge the light outside the window, "... about two hours."

Fronto shook his head madly.

“That’s insane! Why would you do such a thing? You might not be official yet, but you might as well be. If they catch us they’ll bury you alive anyway, and they’ll whip me to death in the forum!”

He bit his lip and pulled the covers up to just below his eyes as though people could see him already. Grumbling, he pointed a finger accusingly at the girl beside him.

“You had no right to go marching around the backstreets of the city unescorted at night. You might as well have been inviting it. It’s your father that should be whipped!”

Vibia laughed a light laugh.

“For Vesta’s sake, Marcus…”

“Don’t say that!” interrupted Fronto, a panicked look in his eyes.

“Marcus, I wasn’t alone. Your friends sort of ambushed my escort and you promised to walk me on. You’re a patrician with a good name, Marcus. And as for ‘why would I do such a thing?’: well, you were fairly insistent, Marcus. I hardly think all the blame can be laid at my door, now can it?”

Fronto’s eyes were darting back and forth nervously.

“Oh shut up!”

Again Vibia laughed. Her lightness was really starting to grate on him.

“How the hell do I get out of here?”

“Do you remember how we got in?”

“Vibia,” Fronto growled, “the state I was in last night I’m lucky I woke up in Latium with two legs and not chained to some Cilician slaver and rowing for my life!”

Again that gratingly happy laugh. Fronto growled once more and slowly slid sideways out of the bed, closing his eyes and wincing until his feet fell to the cold marble with a ‘plop’.

“Where are my clothes?”

“The way you flung them off last night, they could be anywhere.”

Fronto grunted, once again vastly unhappy with his own inability to think past the present. His sister had always said that wine would be the death of him. He’d always assumed she meant through ill health rather than stupidity and girls.

“Never mind… I think I can smell them!”

Vibia laughed quietly as her erstwhile lover hunted around the small room in the shadows, the only light from the high window that he dared not get too close to. The only noise was the gentle background hum of the forum not too distant, interrupted by the slapping of bare feet on marble.

The quiet was split sharply as Vibia snorted at the sight of Fronto standing, holding his tunic in one hand as though it might wriggle to escape while he gave a tentative sniff to the breeches in the other. He squinted and shook his head at the offensive odours that issued from the garments.

“What in the name of Bacchus did I do last night? My clothes smell like the shit-shovellers at the circus!”

Without expecting a reply and with a look of mixed disgust and fear, Fronto climbed into his breeches and pulled on the tunic. The white linen was a mottled grey and yellow colour.

“Aren’t you forgetting your underwear, Marcus?”

Fronto stared down at the floor and prodded something she couldn't see with his foot. As she collapsed into a fresh bout of laughter, Fronto growled.

"If you would be so kind as to get rid of them for me. Perhaps you could burn them in the sacred fire? I've probably pissed Vesta off as much as I can anyway. I'm certainly not putting the bloody things back on. I think something's spent the night living in them!"

He sighed as he began fastening his caligae around his ankles.

"No. I think I'll go 'gladiator' until I get home and then bathe and change and hope the Gods don't know where I live."

Another nervous flick of his eyes.

"If I can get out of here, that is!"

Vibia smiled.

"Think of it as training. They say that Julius Caesar's a war hero. He's been kidnapped by pirates and caught them after. He's won decorations. You'll need to be on your toes if you want to keep up with him in Spain."

Fronto spared time from his dressing to glare at her. He hadn't remembered telling her all about his assignment. He really must learn to keep his wine-sodden mouth shut.

Fastening the belt around his middle, he ran his fingers through the tangled hair, getting them irreparably caught in the process and having to disentangle his own hands from his head.

"Where's my toga?"

"You weren't wearing one when I met you."

"Shit. Another one gone. Somewhere in this city there's a homeless bunch of immigrant Numidians sitting warm and comfy under a collection of my togas."

He sighed and shook his head to try and clear it once again. The effect was more nauseating than clarifying, but he continued to do it regardless, finally stretching and fixing his eyes on Vibia.

"Any suggestions then?"

Vibia shrugged.

"I remember coming in last night, but then I was expected and I came in through the main door from the Via Sacra. I've no idea how you got in, but I'd have loved to have seen it!"

Fronto shook his head again.

"How the hell did I find you then?"

"Marcus, I have no idea. I still think you could leave publically. I've not officially taken the vows. They won't do anything."

Fronto shook his head angrily.

"You're young and... well not innocent, obviously, but naïve in the ways of the law. I've had to study it and believe me, they'll find a way to do us over for this. Just being seen walking out of the vestal house would ruin me for life! Vestals have been executed on merely suspicion of half what we did."

"What we did twice" she corrected.

"Oh for Gods' sake."

Fronto gave her one long lasting glare and then sighed.

"Good luck in your future life, Vibia; I have a feeling you're going to need it. If we ever meet again then I pray it's not for at least thirty years and your vow is over."

The girl, languishing among the sheets, laughed lightly.

“Good luck with your new career, tribune Fronto. I hope your star rises rapidly.”

With a nod, Fronto turned and made for the door. Inching it open just a crack, he peered through. The little knowledge he had of the layout of the house of the vestals had come the same way it had for every teenager in Rome: standing on the heights of the Palatine above, near the sacred grove and peering down into the compound in the hopes that the vestals would be, against all odds, cavorting naked with one another in the sunshine.

Leaving the door open a mere crack, he ran through what he remembered of the layout. The precinct had a perimeter wall that would be too high and bare to climb; he'd walked past it in the forum numerous times, wondering what went on within. The inside face was no different from the outside, apparently, with the exception of immaculately-tended hedges and tall, tapering poplars that were so narrow and willowy that they would be of no use in climbing.

There were five structures in the precinct and he ran through them considering the possibilities. To the west: the circular temple itself; a place to avoid, since there would always be a priestess active there. In the centre stood the house of the priestesses itself, six rooms in two rows of three opening onto a central courtyard, one of which currently contained a nervous soldier. To the north: a small functional building containing the stores, kitchen and so on. Too far from any other structure to be any use but possibly affording hiding places. One to think on. To the southwest a bath house...

For a moment Fronto's mind wandered and, irritatingly, he realised he was smiling as he thought about the bathhouse's possible occupants.

“Stop it” he muttered to himself.

The bathhouse was unlikely to afford a good hiding place. One possibility... no. That didn't bear thinking about. So that left the shrine of Numa Pompilius, legendary founder of the cult. An apsed brick structure, roofed but open to one side to display the cult statue. Fronto smiled as he remembered the view from the Palatine. In his mind's eye he could just about judge the gap between the roof of the shrine and the wall. He could do it. He could jump that far, he was sure.

Reeling in his thoughts and with a clear goal now defined, Fronto peered out through the gap. From here, across the courtyard, he could see the windows and doors of the three rooms opposite. All three doors were closed, which could be either a good or bad sign. He waited patiently for a few minutes but nothing moved in the windows. That was hopeful then. There would have to be at least one priestess on duty in the temple; probably two. One was in bed behind him. That left three. They could be anywhere but, given the earliness of the hour, it was likely they were either abed, bathing, or preparing breakfast in the other structure.

He growled. He'd just have to chance it. His father would beat him if he found out about this, while his mother would faint and his sister would pull him to pieces with her acerbic wit. So nobody must know. Move fast and keep low.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the door wider and ducked to the side. There was no sound and, as he risked a quick look, no movement opposite. Slowly and surreptitiously, Fronto leaned out of the doorway slightly, gazing left and right along the near wall. So far, so good. Smoke was rising

from the oculus in the temple where the fire forever burned. Opposite, to the east, he could see the recessed shrine of Numa with its ancient and revered statue housed in deep shadow. Frowning, he worked out in advance the best possible route to climb the building. He would have to stand on good old King Numa's head. Was there no end to his heresy?

"Here goes" he muttered under his breath and, ducking low enough to move along the wall beneath the level of the windows, he set off at breakneck speed. What the hell was he doing here? He panted as he charged along past the plastered walls of the house, hoping not to wake any priestesses sleeping within with his pounding feet. It was only twenty yards into the shadow of the shrine. There he could take a rest and get his breath back. He could...

Fronto nearly had a heart failure as he hurdled the priestess' leg like an athlete at Olympia. As he'd reached the end of the wall, elated at the thought of reaching relative safety, he'd almost collided with, or tripped over, the priestess who had been walking towards him along the far side of the building. Practiced military training took over as he leapt. He'd planned nothing in his panicked moment and would have come down in a heap on the floor had he not had the sense to curl up. He hit the ground at speed, rolled and came up to find himself face to face with his nemesis.

The vestal priestess, struck silent and immobile by sheer shock, was quite possibly the ugliest old bat Fronto had ever laid his eyes on. In the slow motion experienced by wrong doers as they are found the world over, he watched in horror as the harpy in white before him dropped the carefully folded linen she had been carrying and her hand came slowly up to point an accusing finger at him. Her mouth formed into an 'O'.

Fronto smiled weakly.

"Scuse me."

And then he was running. The panic was truly setting in now. His heart pounded like the feet of a legion on the march, only faster. He could hear the blood pounding in his ears, for which he was extremely grateful as it almost drowned out the shrieks and bellows from the priestess behind him. Had the circumstances been different, he would have been convinced that, with a voice like that, there was some bovine in the woman's ancestry.

The problem was that the panic had carried him automatically. It had given him a head start, but pointed him in the wrong direction. Now he was out of the harpy's reach but leaving the shrine behind and heading toward the bath house.

Shit. Quite literally. There was only one solution now.

He risked a glance over his shoulder and wished fervently that he hadn't. What had, a moment ago, looked like an ugly old priestess screaming in terror now bore more resemblance to Cerberus or some fiendish and malignant lemur of the underworld, howling its hatred and evil as it bore down on him with what he considered an unprecedented turn of speed. What was this woman? If all the vestals were like this, he'd hate to meet one in a dark alley and he'd certainly not be coming back in thirty years to look for Vibia.

Muscles pumping, heart pounding and sweat pouring from his hairline, Fronto examined the building ahead. No door visible, so it must be around the other side. Good. He could hear another voice somewhere behind him now. The only thing he could truly hope for was that, if he made it out of this, the

chances of the priestesses recognising him once he'd cleaned up from this horrendous state was extremely unlikely.

His heart in his mouth, Fronto hurtled round the corner. There was the door. Hoping he was as clever as he thought, he wrenched the door open with a clatter and then ran on along the outside toward the next corner. As he ran, he kept an eye on the ground. He had only one hope here: a drain cover down to the sewers. It was possible there was one, though far from guaranteed, given the security and sanctity of the precinct. Even if there was, it could be buried beneath the grass. Dodging round the far corner, he came to a halt and looked around desperately.

Fortuna was Fronto's patron Goddess.

There, like a beautiful square, white, marble dream, was the cover of the drain. Just wide enough to admit him and kept free of grass, gravel and weeds by the helpful priestesses, who presumably gardened a great deal to keep their mind off the pastimes they were forbidden. It may be a gateway to half the poo of central Rome but, right now, Fronto could kiss every brick down that tunnel.

Dropping to his knees, he yanked at the marble block and succeeded in levering it upright, balanced on its thick edge. With a quick, desperate look around, he leaned forward to look down the hole.

The blast of acrid air that rose from the passage brought tears instantly to his eyes and threatened to burn off his nose hair. Blinking, he leaned back. He was just considering looking for an alternate route when he overheard the edge of a shouted warning inside the baths. Now there were two voices. Crap. He was getting outnumbered.

Taking as deep a breath as he dared attempt, Fronto narrowed his eyes to slits and pulled himself forward across the hole. Holding himself up with his arms, he dropped his feet into the dank darkness and scabbled around until he found purchase on either side with his feet. Achieving a foothold among the slippery bricks, he concertinaed his body down into the hole so that he could pull the cover over the top.

Trying very hard not to breathe at all, he began to carefully descend the eight feet down to the tunnel below. He had almost worked his way down to the point at which the brickwork opened out into a wide tunnel when the worst thing imaginable happened and his boot slipped on the fungus that grew on the bricks. He was pretty sure he shrieked, regardless of the possibility of being heard from above. What he was sure about was that he had the presence of mind to close his mouth and grip his nose tightly before he plunged with a wet slap into the two feet of oozing nastiness beneath him.

In the brief moment before he recovered his wits, Fronto found himself seriously wondering whether it might have been preferable to be caught and executed than to have escaped by this route.

He stood, gripped his sides and leaned over to be copiously sick into the ooze and almost laughed when he considered the possibility that such an act may just make the place marginally nicer. Reaching up to wipe his mouth, he remembered just in time and lowered his brownish-green stinking arm back to his side.

Gritting his teeth, he climbed out of the torrent onto one of the walkways and began to plod along the tunnel. He would have to get his

bearings. He needed to make it back to the Aventine, but was now so thoroughly turned around that he could be anywhere.

Sighing as deeply as he dared, he peered down at the direction of what could laughingly be called 'the flow'. It would be a bit of a walk, but following it to its inevitable conclusion where the Cloaca Maxima emptied into the Tiber, he would at least exit somewhere away from the crowded central markets.

Miserably, he plodded and slapped along through the tunnels, slowly becoming acclimatized to the oppressive darkness, broken only by the occasional light from a drain cover above, and to the unbelievable smell. How you couldn't smell this in the street above was beyond him. He was pretty sure he'd be able to smell this for the rest of his life, no matter where he was.

Several twists and turns later, he saw a bright glow ahead and picked up his pace as much as he dared, worrying over the possibility of slipping back into the murk. Gradually the arc of light came closer until finally, he found himself striding out into the brilliant dazzling sunlight. Edging toward the end of the tunnel, he peered left and right along the river bank. The Tiber flowed past deep and green. Well... green until it converged with the brown sludge beneath him. Taking a lungful of air he exploded in a coughing fit.

There was no one close by. A fisherman sat on the bank some hundred yards away upstream, but he could keep himself hidden by shrubs.

Tentatively, he slipped down the bank by the side of the channel that emptied Rome's sewage into the river. Taking a deep breath, fully clothed, he continued sliding down until he plunged with relief into the cold water. Deep beneath, among the weeds, he thrashed around, trying to get as much as possible of both clothes and skin in cleansing contact with the water. He stayed down as long as he could hold his breath and finally launched himself upwards and out into the air with a loud splash.

Looking round, he saw the fisherman watching him. He considered a cheeky wave, but this was not the time for frivolities. Looking down, the remnants of the sludge that had covered him sat like a slick on the surface of the water, gradually carried away from him by the flow.

He took a deep breath.

No.

He may be ostensibly clean, but he still smelled like a public latrine during the Saturnalia. Wincing, he swam to the bank a few yards away and splashed water into his armpits. Sighing, he climbed the bank up to the pavement. Peeking over the edge, he saw the forum boarium stretching away before him. There were a few people setting up stalls, but no one close enough to the river to panic him.

Taking another deep breath, he stood and stepped back into the civilised world. Shaking his head in amazement at the things that happened to him, he turned south and began to run along the bank.

Ignoring the looks he received from passers by and the few audible comments about vagrancy and atrocious smells, he jogged past the end of the circus maximus and off into one of the many streets that snaked up the hill of the Aventine, keeping his head down to stay unrecognisable as he passed the houses of friends and neighbours until finally, blessedly, he saw the front gate of his family's villa.

In a flood of relief, he rushed to the door and hammered repeatedly on it, hopping nervously from foot to foot, while he waited to be admitted. A

moment later, Posco, the chief house slave opened the door, his eyes widening in disgust.

“Can we help you?”

“Posco... it’s me!”

The slave blinked and then stared at Fronto.

“Master Marcus?”

“Yes, now in the name of Venus Cloacina, will you let me in?”

The slave stood to one side and Fronto tried not to take personally the face the man made as he passed close by. Posco closed the door behind him.

“Would the master care to make his way to the bath and I shall find some clean clothes and a strigil?”

Fronto deflated and nodded.

“Thank you, Posco.”

“To remove the odour from your person would be a pleasure, sir.”

Fronto shot him an irritable glance and then rolled his eyes skyward as his sister turned the corner into the atrium.

“Gods, Marcus. What have you been doing? Swimming in sewers?”

“Faleria, you have no idea. I have had the morning from Tarterus, Hydra, Tisiphone and all.”

“Hydra, Tisiphone, and apparently poo.”

Fronto glared at his sister as she laughed past the hand that held her nose shut.

“Funny. Very funny. I’m going for a bath.”

“On our evening of debauchery, dear brother, did we perhaps lose another toga?”

Fronto nodded, grimacing.

“Going to have to borrow some more coin from mother to buy another.”

Faleria chuckled.

“She’s going to love that. You’ll have to get a move on, too. You need a good one.”

Fronto shook his head. “I’m not going anywhere for several days. I won’t need it. It can be packed away for the voyage.”

“I think not, Marcus” she said as she turned to walk away. “The day after tomorrow, the Vestalia begins. With no father around these days, you’ll have to escort her to the Vestal temple for the rites.”

Behind her, Posco rushed to try and catch the young master as he fainted. He was too late to prevent a nasty bump on the head but then, under all this mess, who would notice it.