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COMMEDIA

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A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the
degree of
Master of Arts in Creative Writing

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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GRADUATE SCHOOL IN HUMANITIES

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ABSTRACT

Commedia is a novel set in 410 AD during the collapse of the Roman Empire. The island of Britain has recently freed itself from Roman rule, and a small group of comedy actors find themselves caught up in a cultural struggle between the old Roman aristocracy and the new British *nouveau riche*. On a tour around Britain, the actors uncover a political and criminal plot that puts Britain in danger of invasion by Saxon mercenaries.

The primary goal of writing *Commedia* was to create a comedy set during the collapse of a major civilization, and to put everyday pettiness and frivolity against a backdrop of historical disaster.

The vision of 5th Century Britain presented in the novel is inspired primarily on the books *The New Rome: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* by Cullen Murphy, *AD 381: Heretics, Pagans and the Dawn of the Monotheistic State* by Charles Freeman, *An Age Of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons, AD 400-600* by Christopher A Snyder and the play *The Ghost Story* by Plautus. The names, food, geography, tribes, household items, political situations and other miscellanea in the book are all as accurate as possible.

Nonetheless this is a novel, and it works according to the conventions of fiction. The characters speak a contemporary English, although concessions for the time period have been made, and expressions and phrases that feel overly modern been avoided in the dialogue. Likewise, any metaphors, similes and measurements that do not fit into the time period have been avoided.

The main focus of the novel is on action and comedy. The plot engages with several themes, including the importance and the limitations of comedy, the role of actors and slaves in society and the complexities of religious absolutism. Although not intended allegorically, the novel has parallels to contemporary South Africa as it emerges from its colonial and apartheid past. It is also intended to illustrate the idea that people embedded in a particular time and culture may find it hard to comprehend the full scale of the events unfolding around them.

PART 1:

DECLINE

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1: MUSCA**LONDINIUM AUGUSTA, 410 AD**

It was a burial, and Curio had the giggles. He tried to stop himself laughing by stamping down on the toes of his foot, but it didn't help. Everything he saw made him feel like he was going to burst. The mud splattered on the nobility's funeral robes, for example, or the way they were glaring at the young priest, who couldn't pronounce the ceremony's high-Latin words. The way the women's jewellery was jangling in the wind. But the fact that Musca was dead was enough. The more that Curio told himself how awful it would be to laugh at something so tragic, the worse it got.

They were in a field to the east of the town, on a gentle slope littered with grave markers. This was where the lowest of the low were buried. There were other graveyards to the north with cultivated flowerbeds and marble mausoleums, where the citizens of Londinium would come to wander in the sun. Not here. The graves were shallow, and the gentle rain falling throughout the day had washed away the upper layers of mud bringing some disturbing things to the surface. A couple of goats stood nearby, watching the proceedings through hourglass pupils and chewing on the remains. Other than that, the field was empty. No trees, no shrubs, no buildings. No mausoleum for Musca. They were there to make sure that he was buried in disgrace.

Musca's body was wrapped up in the shroud at the foot of the grave. The sheer size of it was a testament to a life lived for pleasure. In his forty years he had eaten spectacular volumes of pork, lamb, venison, beef, chicken, turkey, quail, and on one occasion when the imperial menagerie closed, giraffe. Musca was the last old-school

Roman in a Britain run by the bishops and Christian tribal leaders. In the war between virtue and vice, Musca had been the last remaining outpost of vice.

The priest came to the end of his scroll and looked over at the slave captain, who signalled to his men. Four strong slaves lifted Musca's stretcher, and carry it over the grave. As they lowered it the wet ropes slipped in the slaves' hands and two of them lost control. The stretcher flipped, and Musca's body dropped down into the muddy water at the bottom of the hole.

The splash sounded exactly like a privy. The priest lost control of his scroll, and half of it unrolled down into the hole. Curio screwed up his eyes and pinched his nose closed and prayed that the people around him thought he was crying.

* * * * *

2: PRIMUS

M. Equitius Primus, Praetorian prefect of the Britains, walked towards his new villa, with his slave Lupus hurrying behind him.

"Twelve new properties, Master. And seven mills in total. And about twelve thousand *Solidi* in your personal treasury. Your personal wealth has more than tripled."

"Good," said Primus. "Maybe I can put it to better use than Musca did."

The entrance to the villa was at the end of the street ahead. Primus was pleased to see that the torches were already lit on either side of the door.

"New messages?" he asked.

Lupus checked the wax tablet he was holding.

“A request by the Emperor for five more grain shipments. I’ve already seen to it, Master. And as you suspected, the count of the Saxon Shore says that the payment still hasn’t arrived.”

Primus ran his fingers through his thinning hair.

“We can’t afford this. How many soldiers did we send to protect it?”

“Twenty, master. All missing.”

“We’ll need to change our tactics. Anything else?”

“Just this, Master.”

Lupus took an opened letter from behind the tablet, and gave it to Primus.

“I thought you’d want to see it yourself, Master. One of your spies intercepted it at the docks. The landowners are entreating emperor Honorius to send a legion to take back Britain. They’re saying they have no faith in Constantine III’s administration.”

Primus skimmed the letter and looked at the names at the bottom of the page. He recognised several of them as acquaintances from his wife’s parties. This was going to cause trouble.

He mulled over his delicate political situation. Four years earlier, after almost four hundred years of Roman occupation, Britain had rebelled and separated from the Western Roman Empire. A new wave of British leaders had come to power, and most of the Romans in the administration had been purged. The language of power was still Roman, and the old Roman landowners kept their property, but the government was now British. Primus had survived, barely, through hard work, and through large payments to the church.

But his position was shaky. The latest British emperor, Constantine III, had taken the army over to Gaul to expand his empire, leaving a power vacuum. The remaining

British politicians were using any advantage they had to rise up the ranks. If they found out that a group of Romans was trying to topple the government it would almost certainly mean another purge, and this time Primus was prominent enough to be a prime target.

“Have them all arrested,” he said, handing back the letter. “And after they’re executed, make sure their property goes to Constantine.”

“Yes, Master.”

“And make sure he knows who turned them in.”

“Yes, Master.”

He hoped it would be enough. It was an unfortunate state of affairs. Still, his duty as Constantine’s prefect wasn’t without its benefits. He approached the main doors of his latest acquisition.

In the half-light, Musca’s villa was a magnificent slice of the old empire. Patches of the plaster had fallen away, and there was some moss under the windows, but it was nothing that a few hours of work couldn’t fix. It was in the fashionable east end of town, too, away from the Forum. Primus could easily see himself welcoming guests here. It might even be good place to keep his wife and children if the emperor ever asked for him in Gaul.

“Call the household slaves together, Lupus,” he said. “Let me talk to my new property.”

* * * * *

3: ALBA

The atrium was the heart of the villa. In the centre of the room was a rectangular pond filled with green water. The roof was open, although Primus could see a leather canopy folded up in the corner. Along the walls were sculptures and furniture, including eating couches, low tables, and a large oak writing desk. Primus stood next to it as the slaves arranged themselves in the room in front of him.

“There’s too many of them,” Primus said to Lupus quietly. “This can’t be efficient.”

Lupus checked his tablet. “Three hundred and sixty-seven slaves in all. Twenty-eight here. Fifty-three work the fields on his farms. The rest are at his villas by Venta Belgarum and Aquae Sulis.”

“Get rid of as many as you can. I can’t have unnecessary slaves. If they’re not working they’ll get lazy.”

“Yes, Master.”

Primus turned to the room, and looked over the heads of the slaves, and tried not to make eye contact. He decided to try a soft approach first.

“Slaves, your old master is dead. Be thankful. Musca was corrupt and venal. He would have dragged you all down with him.

“I pity you for your condition. As slaves, you cannot save your own souls. A free citizen can chose to sin or not to sin, but a slave can only obey. You are like horses, who cannot disobey your rider as he drives you over the cliffs. But I have your reins now, and we shall ride a different path. The path is narrow but it is straight as an arrow, and it goes ever upwards. And I will ride all of you there. I will ride you hard!”

At the back of the room, somebody coughed. Lupus, at his side, concentrated on making notes on the tablet.

“I will be making some changes. For example, I believe Musca had a large kitchen. Many of you working there will be retrained or sold. I’m not sure what other areas of inefficiency there are, but I will examine the day-to-day running of the property, starting tonight. Bring me food and wine and a poison taster, and be quick about it. Everyone else, you are dismissed. Go to your normal positions, and await your orders.”

Primus watched the slaves filter out, muttering louder than he would have liked. He sat down at the oak desk, and closed his eyes.

He hoped that they’d be quick with the supper. There was a bowl of grapes on the table, round and freshly-picked. He decided to ignore them. Strength, he thought, comes from self-discipline. A man who controls himself can achieve anything. He glanced up, and was surprised to see a woman sitting opposite him.

She wore the brown robes of a slave, and her red hair was tied back under a scarf. She was quietly staring down at polished surface of the desk.

Primus sat upright.

“What are -? Why are you here, Slave?”

“You told us to go to our stations, Master.”

“I did.”

“This is my station. I ate with the old Master, Master.”

“What for?” he asked.

The slave tucked a stray strand of hair under her head-cloth.

“He would tell me stories about people he knew, Master. And what his mistresses were up to.”

“Why?”

“For the theatre, Master. He said it would make me a better actress.”

The smell of cooking was coming through from the kitchen. It was mostly grease and pork. Primus realised he'd have to make clearer food orders from now on. He plucked a grape, and put it back immediately.

"How does talking to a slave help the theatre?" he said. "I thought Musca wrote plays for you."

Musca's theatre had been a major problem for Primus. It was full of dissidents, the kind of people who lived to poke fun at everything Primus stood for. He'd seen one of Musca's actors at the burial earlier, standing on one leg for some reason. It was the sort of pointless and disrespectful thing that they did.

They also meddled in politics. When rumours were going around that a bishop was having an affair with a magistrates wife, Musca's theatre had put on a play that re-enacted the situation, but with the bishop eloping with a goat. The political fallout had driven a wedge between the bishops and the local authorities, and the bishop in question had fled to Uriconium. Musca was too powerful to be arrested outright, but the church and the Emperor's town criers had loudly proclaimed that the theatre was immoral. Perversely, it had only made it more popular.

"No one writes the plays down, Master," said the slave, wrinkling her nose in a way that sent an unexpected shiver through Primus's ribs.

"What's your name, slave?"

"Alba, Master."

"Alba. You make up the plays yourselves? You and the other actors?"

The slave girl hesitated. "Almost, Master. Musca told us roughly what we were going to do, and we worked it on stage."

Primus frowned, and ran a thumbnail through the table's varnish. He had assumed that the actors were just Musca's puppets. The fact that they were creative about it troubled him. Common people should not have political influence.

There was a clatter from the kitchen corridor, and a pair of slaves brought in a tray of food. They laid down a tablecloth and placed the tray in front of Primus, giving him a welcome distraction. A short, fat taster came in, and sampled the meal with a small ladle. He started with the bowl of soup, winced slightly, then tried the shallots, and finally scooped up a piece from the plate of fried pork udders. He chewed, mopped his mouth with the corner of his apron, and stood to attention at the side of the table. Primus's stomach grumbled.

He turned his attention back to Alba. She had locked her fingers together in front of her, and was looking down at her hands. A curl of hair had freed itself from her head-scarf. In the candlelight she looked like a sculpture. The light brush of freckles over her pale nose added to the marble effect. Primus marvelled that a thing of such a beauty could have become his personal property.

"Master? May I speak?"

"Hmm?" She was being too forward, but he waved her on.

"Master, will the theatre re-open?"

"That's up to the new owner."

"Not you, Master?"

"No," he said. "I have decided to hand the theatre over to the most deserving candidate. The Church."

It was a good decision, he thought. It cemented his relationship with the church and killed the theatre simultaneously. The building would be perfect for religious

gatherings. The walls were probably tainted with sin, of course, but the area could be cleansed and sanctifi-

The table shook. Primus's soup slopped slightly out of the bowl. He looked up. The taster was still staring upwards and counting. The actress was straightening the edge of the tablecloth with her fingers. She wiped it smooth, and asked "Master, may I enquire about the actors?"

"They aren't my concern." Had she just kicked his table?

"Musca was their patron, Master, so if you're inheriting from him- "

"No. I'm under no obligation to them, slave, and neither are you." Why would she kick the table?

"They have no skills other than acting, Master."

"That's poor judgement on their part." Maybe it was accidental. And it was too late to bring it up, now. It would make him look foolish.

"Nor do I, Master."

"What was that?"

"I don't have any other skills, Master. Acting is what I've been trained to do."

"I can find a new position for you. A more appropriate one."

She stood up. *What are you doing?* He thought. She walked around the table until she stood over him, and cupped his face in her hands.

"Thank you for looking after me, Master," she whispered into his ear, and bit his lobe gently. This was such a breach of protocol that he couldn't speak.

She plucked a grape from the bowl, and started peeling it. *She was peeling his grape.* His hand shot out and grabbed her wrist, and tugged her towards him. Her lips were inches from his. He could smell her breath, sweetened with fennel. He couldn't

see the food taster, but the quiet counting had stopped, and there was the silence of someone furiously minding their own business.

“Master?” she asked. “Is something the matter?”

“You are overstepping your bounds.” His grip tightened, and he could feel the bones of her wrist. It must have hurt, but Alba only tilted her head slightly.

“Am I doing something against your will, Master?”

Primus didn't know how to answer. For the first time in years, he felt he was in a situation outside his own control.

“That was my grape,” was all he could say.

“Everything is yours,” she said, popping the grape into his open mouth. She pulled herself free, and walked away across the atrium. There was a low flight of steps up to the doorway that lead deeper into the villa. As she climbed them she looked back over her shoulder.

“I look forward to the new positions you find for me, master,” she said, running her fingers up the doorframe.

“Yes,” he cleared his throat. “Very good.”

Alba disappeared into the dark of the corridor leading up to the bedchamber.

Primus sat in silence, staring ahead, slowly chewing the grape. This was difficult. He had never taken advantage of a slave, because that was what the church expected of him. He had even made public speeches condemning men who lay with slaves. After all, it was the equivalent to lying with livestock, wasn't it? But then again, he had never had a slave that looked like Alba. She was his property, this was his estate, and what he did here was his own business. It was a terrible thought. After an hour in this villa, he was already starting to think like Musca.

There was another, more embarrassing problem. For the last several months Primus had been having difficulty in bed with his wife. It wasn't that surprising, as he had a lot on his mind, and his wife was no longer a young woman. But what if he threw away his morality and lay with Alba, only to find that he still couldn't maintain his manhood? What would he be, then?

He swallowed the grape.

"Taster? I take it the food's safe."

"Yes, Master," said the taster, and bowed.

"Go and find my slave Lupus. Send him to me. And tell the slaves we shan't be spending the night here after all."

"Very good, Master."

"Go. And make sure I'm not disturbed again during my meal."

"Yes, Master."

Primus felt he should at least punish Alba for being so forward, but that could wait. He had bigger issues to deal with, and all the talk about the actors had given him an idea. He took his first taste of the soup, and winced slightly. As he swallowed, the taster bowed and turned.

The taster had been a faithful servant of Musca for many years. He enjoyed his position, despite its risk, because it was easy work and he got to taste the finest foods that Britain had to offer. He had also been seeing one of the kitchen maids for many years, and although he could never afford it, he had dreams of saving up his stipend and buying freedom for both of them.

In the kitchens a few minutes before, Primus's slave Lupus had told him that his duties would be taken on by one of the more active slaves. The taster would be given

as a gift to a bishop in Deva, and would be leaving within the week. He would be losing his position, his woman and his lifelong friends.

But he wasn't above pissing in the new master's soup, even if it meant taking a mouthful of his own urine.

* * * * *

4: PRISON

Curio wasn't certain how he ended up getting arrested. It wasn't surprising that it had happened. The way that Curio lived his life, it was overdue. But in his hung-over state, he couldn't piece together the sequence of events that led to him being thrown into the stinking cells under the Londinium barracks.

Curio sat with his back against the wall and stretched out his legs, avoiding the rat droppings on the floor. He was alone except for another actor, Pavo, who was huddled in the opposite corner, with a ragged black cloak that made him look like a homeless crow.

"This wouldn't have happened in the old days," said Pavo. "Bloody Brits."

Curio had met up with Pavo the night before at the actors' usual drinking house in the north of the town. The place was nicknamed The Confessional, because it was so cramped that only one person could talk at a time. They had drunk their way through the owner's whole stock of cheap beer, and railed against the way the nobles had given Musca a pauper's burial. Pavo complained about how the British had no respect for Roman values. Curio half-heartedly tried to work out what other work they could get, and they had had a long argument over whether or not Curio was attractive enough to work as a male prostitute. The owner had kicked them out onto the street

shortly after dawn. The last thing Curio remembered was stumbling down towards the river, while Pavo tried to sell him to every man and woman they passed.

“Don’t worry,” said Curio, and winced. Talking was not a good idea. Sparks danced in front of his eyes. He couldn’t work out what pain was from the hangover, and what was from the beating the soldiers had given them. “One of the others will get us out.”

“No they won’t,” said Pavo, gloomily.

Curio had been in the cells once before, when he’d been working as a snare for a gang of street-thieves. His job had been to get the attention of passers-by long enough for the other thieves to cut their purses.

He’d been good at snaring. He had developed a range of ‘acts’, like the hilarious drunkard, or the man overreacting to a beggar, or the man complaining that he had just ruined his new boots by stepping in manure. Snaring required timing, and a good sense of what other people were thinking. Curio had a natural talent for it. In his spare time he picked up some conjuring and juggling tricks from the street performers, and noticed that they all worked on misdirection, just like snaring. He became obsessed with finding ways to catch, hold and control people’s attention.

Then one evening while Curio was distracting people by pretending that a cart had run over his foot, a rookie gang-member missed a purse and scratched its owner with his knife. The owner shouted, and the rookie was caught by soldiers, who took Curio in, too, out of suspicion.

Curio spent a week in the cells before he finally managed to talk his way out. He wanted to get back on the job, but the soldiers knew his face and the thieves couldn’t risk working with him any more. Fortunately, a few days later Curio spent his last few coins on a play at Musca’s theatre, and found his real calling.

It wasn't as likely that he would be able to talk his way out of the cells this time. He was a short, tubby man in a threadbare tunic, and not the wide-eyed and innocent looking boy that he used to be. He wondered if there was anyone who might come to the rescue. His only family was a cousin in the priesthood who had disowned him, and a nephew who picked up the skittles at the bowling alley behind the baths. The other actors probably wouldn't be able to help. Even if they had money for the bribe, the soldiers were probably after them, too.

Curio wondered what all the rest of Musca's actors were up to. Probably finding long-term jobs as clerks or crooks, which is what Curio and Pavo should have been doing, instead of getting themselves arrested.

Down the corridor a bolt slid open, and footsteps echoed towards the cell.

"Just two of 'em," said a voice that sounded to Curio like a low-ranking soldier. "Hauled 'em in last night in a terrible state."

"What did you arrest them for?" said a Roman voice. "Public nuisance?"

"Treason, sir."

"Treason?" said the Roman. "You're sure?"

"We caught them drunk as rats down by the old docks. One of them was shouting about the emperor, sir. He was calling him a Brit."

On the other side of the cell, Pavo studied a fascinating piece of lichen growing out of a crack in the wall, and avoided Curio's eyes.

"And the other one?"

There was a slight pause.

"He threw up on my boots," said the soldier.

"That's hardly treason is it?" said the Roman.

The soldier sounded like he was going to argue, but thought the better of it.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

There was the sound of a deadbolt being drawn back, and a soldier pulled open the door. He was a thick-necked man with a military moustache, and the light from the candle he was holding made his eyes glitter in the dark.

“All right, you two,” he said. “On your feet.”

He waved the candle like a baton, pointing Curio and Pavo over to the far wall. After they were standing side by side with their backs to the wall, the soldier gave the all clear and a man in a toga walked in, followed by a slave carrying a writing tablet.

Curio was immediately wary. Togas weren't common, except on the highest nobility, and even then only for special occasions. The only other people who ever wore togas were the actors themselves, on stage, when they were making fun of the rich.

The Roman looked up at Pavo and down at Curio, and sniffed.

“These are the only ones you could find?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” said the soldier.

“Where are the others? Actors can't be hard to track down, can they? Hundreds of people must have seen them.”

The slave tapped his stylus.

“They wear masks on stage, Master,” he said quietly.

“Thank you, Lupus,” said the Roman. He was staring at Curio and Pavo again, as if they were two ropes of dead rats hanging outside a rat catcher's.

“Well, these ones will have to do.”

“Do for what?” said Curio.

The Roman glared at Curio. The soldier stepped forward, put his hand on Curio's forehead and shoved, knocking the back of his head against the stone wall.

“Thank you,” the Roman said to the soldier. He turned back to the actors. “I am Marcus Equitius Primus, Praetorian of Emperor Constantine, and it would do you well to show some respect.”

Primus gathered up his toga so it wouldn't touch the filthy floor, and began to pace.

“I have a question for you,” he said. “Why do you think we have soldiers?”

The soldier prodded Curio with a pair of fat fingers.

“Answer,” he said.

Curio blinked away the sparks.

“To hurt me?”

“No. Why do we, the Lord's chosen people, have soldiers who are trained to kill, when He, the Lord, specifically told us not to kill?”

Primus stopped in front of Pavo. Pavo opened his mouth, but Primus cut him off before he could speak.

“It's because any evil can be good, if it is done for the benefit of the Lord. We are allowed to conquer heathens by the sword, and root out heretics with torture, because slaughter and torture can be good if they're done in His name. Do you see? And it makes me think. What other evils can be turned to the greater benefit of the Lord?”

Curio didn't know where this was going, but he didn't like it.

Primus waved his hand at the soldier, who exited smartly. He came back in a moment later, with a familiar-looking man in tow.

He was no more than eighteen, in an oversized robe and an unflattering bowl-shaped haircut. Curio knew where he'd seen him before. He was the priest from Musca's funeral.

“This is father Trio,” said Primus.

“God be with you,” said Trio, staying as far from the actors as he could.

“Thank you,” said Primus. “Please, if you could, Father, tell us the church’s position on the theatre.”

Trio bit his lower lip.

“We decided, that is, it was agreed that theatre is a mortal danger to our society. It makes light of things that should be taken seriously. What’s worse, it distracts people from the Word of Truth. Other pleasures do, too, of course, but they all have a saving grace. Food nourishes us, and drink quenches us, and other pleasures...um...”

Primus came to the rescue.

“...Other pleasures replenish the numbers of our glorious society,” he said. “But what I need to know is, does the theatre have a saving grace? Can it be used for good?”

Curio knew he wasn’t meant to answer this. It was pretty clear that Primus was putting on some kind of act, although Curio couldn’t tell why.

Primus started pacing again. “My idea is this,” he said. “An experiment. When I was young, there were troupes of actors that would go from garrison to garrison, entertaining the soldiers. You will do the same thing, only instead of entertaining, you will be educating. I’ve spoken to Bishop Dedwin, and he’s agreed to let Father Trio here escort you. I’m sure he’ll be able to write you some morally elevating plays.”

This must have been the first time that Father Trio had heard the news, because his brow became deeply furrowed.

“I propose that you travel up to Pons Aelii on Hadrian’s wall. Put on a play there for the Count of the Saxon Shore. If the response is good, then there might be a chance at redeeming your profession. What do you say?”

Curio glanced at Pavo. From what he'd heard, the rest of Britain was crawling with bandits and pirate raiders, and he had no wish to die. Of course, once they were released from the cell there would be nothing to stop them from fleeing into the maze of hovels around the north gate, where they'd never be seen again.

"Your generosity knows no bounds, Master," said Pavo.

"Very well," said Primus. "I will make the travel arrangements with Father Trio, and organise a bodyguard. Hail Constantine."

He saluted and left the cell, followed by Lupus and Trio. As Curio and Pavo tried to leave, the soldier blocked their way.

"Aren't we free?" said Pavo.

"Not yet," said Primus, looking over his shoulder. "It was hard enough to find actors the first time. The preparations should take about a week."

The guard slammed the door. Pavo put his back against the wall and slid down until he hit the ground.

"So that's it," he said. "We're going to die."

* * * * *

5: DEPARTURE

Primus walked through the cold morning air, which he had decided was bracing. He wasn't one of those nobles who travelled everywhere by litter, growing fat while his slaves got all the benefit of the exercise. He was a real Roman.

Lupus followed behind, dragging a large wooden chest on a hand-cart. At his side was a tall, blond man wearing scale mail and a travelling pack. He had a thick moustache, and kept his hand on the hilt of his sword.

The sun wasn't up yet, but the streets were already filled with slaves and workers carrying water and preparing food. Primus walked past inviting smells of roasting sausages and freshly baked bread dunked in wine. He felt good. The night before he'd thought about the slave girl Alba, and succumbed to the sin of onanism. He wasn't proud of himself, but he was relieved that his problem with virility had cleared up. He decided to go back to Musca's house and spend the night this time. He told himself that there was a lot of work to be done there. He still needed to commission a repairman and a house-painter, and get the hypocaust fixed. All kinds of things.

The north gate squatted in the centre of Londinium's poorest district. Multi-storey hovels leaned drunkenly against the high city walls for support. Most of the town's workers lived here, in cheap rooms that burned down or collapsed every few years.

Other towns built their walls close to the city centre, leaving the poor people in the unfortified outskirts to fend for themselves. Londinium's walls were larger, embracing far more of its citizens, and leading to less of a divide between the rich and the poor. Primus didn't approve.

The main gate's tall arch was wide enough to accommodate wagons travelling in both directions. Next to it were the army stables, where Father Trio's troupe of actors were getting ready to depart. They were waiting by a covered ox wagon with props and costume boxes from Musca's theatre piled up beside it.

The soldier from the prison was sitting on a bale of hay, chewing on a straw and was keeping an eye on the actors. The taller actor was wearing a wide-brimmed travel hat, and moaning to Father Trio about expenses. The shorter actor sat on a sack of grain next to the cart, looking bored.

“What about if the audience likes the play, and they throw money at us?” said the tall one. “Can we keep it?”

Father Trio looked uncertain. “I don’t know. Maybe. I suppose.”

“No,” said Primus, striding forward. “Father Trio is my representative on this tour. All the money goes through him.”

Father Trio jumped at the sound of Primus’s voice, and saluted, and the tall actor stood up straighter. Primus couldn’t help noticing that the shorter one didn’t stand, though. *Troublemaker*, he thought.

He turned to Father Trio. “Are you almost ready?”

“Almost,” said the priest. “We’re packing the last supplies into the wagon.”

Father Trio beckoned to the short actor sitting on the grain sack, and pointed towards the back of the wagon. The actor nodded and stood up, but as soon as Trio looked away the actor sat down again with a childish grin.

Lupus pulled the hand-cart next to the wagon, and began unloading the chest. Primus took a key out of his purse and gave it to Father Trio.

“This is for the chest, Father,” he said. “Keep it in your purse until Pons Aelii. And this is Octa.”

The blond man at his side nodded.

“He’ll be protecting you on your journey. I know you were probably hoping for more men, but Octa is one of our finest soldiers-”

“Saxons.”

“What was that?” said Primus.

“Saxon. Not soldier,” said Octa in a thick Germanic accent.

Trio looked from Primus to Octa. Primus began to feel that he was losing control of the situation.

“Very well,” he said. “Saxon.”

That seemed to mollify Octa, who nodded and went to sit on the driving seat of the wagon.

As he sat down, a leather flap at the back of the wagon opened and Alba climbed out. When she saw Primus, she stopped and bowed her head coyly.

“What’s she doing here?” said Primus.

Lupus looked up from unloading the chest from the handcart.

“Um, Master,” he said. “You told me to find any other actors that I could.”

“Not her. I need her.”

“What for, Master?” Lupus asked.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“Nothing,” said Primus. “You’re right. She’s an actress.”

This was his punishment for desiring a slave. The Lord would never let him have her.

“All right,” he said. “She can go on the tour. But no one is to lay a finger on her,” he said. “Her virtue is Trio’s responsibility until she gets back to Londinium. Do you all understand me?”

The actors looked at each other.

“Perfectly,” said the short one, smiling a little too widely.

* * * * *

6: THE ROAD TO VERULAMIUM

Curio let his feet dangle off the back of the ox wagon and watched the road rolling out, pushing him away from home. This was the first time he had been more

than a mile from Londinium since he'd arrived there as a child, and without its walls and buildings around him he felt exposed. Still, it was good to be out of the cell. He never wanted to see Pavo crapping in a bucket again.

Father Trio was walking behind the wagon, getting a little exercise. Pavo wasn't going to be outdone by a man of the cloth, and was matching his pace on the opposite side of the road. Curio watched Pavo striding along with his elbows swinging. Sweat was streaking down his cheeks, and he was clearly in pain. Now and again he would glance at Trio, who didn't seem to notice that they were in competition. Trio's lack of effort was driving Pavo mad, but he didn't have anything to channel his anger into except more exertion.

The priest looked glad to be outside the city. He was soaking in all the minor glories of nature, like the blue sky or the flowers in the hedges. Curio didn't understand the appeal. It was nice, but not for hours on end. It was too obvious. There wasn't a twist.

Octa was driving the ox, and hadn't looked back at them or said a word since they left Londinium. Inside the wagon, Alba was curled up on some blankets behind the props box and the bags of grain. When Curio looked around he could make out the curve of her shoulder, jerking from side to side as the wagon wheels rolled over some fallen branches.

Having Alba along made Curio optimistic. They had been in a few plays together, although she'd mainly had minor roles. She had a reputation for being wilful, which Curio thought was a good thing. He didn't know if he stood a chance with her. He normally attracted rougher-looking women who laughed uproariously after a couple of drinks. Still, they had three weeks together on the open road, which would be more than enough time to try his luck.

He yawned and checked the sun. It was about halfway to the horizon, which meant it was the ninth hour, which would explain why he couldn't feel his bum any more. He'd been on the open road for eight hours without a cushion, and every irregularity in the road's surface had been turned into an arse-numbing judder. He stared at the moving ground, and waited for the day to end.

* * * * *

7: THE INN

Curio got his first taste of what a tour run by Father Trio would be like that evening. He knew that they wouldn't reach Verulamium before sunset, but he wasn't too concerned because he knew that there'd be some good inns on the way. He was hoping for somewhere with a roaring fire, some honeyed wine, a soft bed and a local girl to share it. As the sun set, they came to a pleasant-looking travel lodge. There was smoke curling up from a bonfire behind the building, and the inviting sound of people laughing and playing musical instruments. Curio's heart rose. He rooted through the wagon to gather up his purse and his travelling sack, and held them in his arms as the wagon slowly passed the inn, and started climbing up the next hill. When it was clear that they weren't stopping he dropped off the wagon and went to speak to Father Trio.

The priest had overtaken the wagon a few hours before. His eyes were glazed, but he acknowledged Curio's approach with a beatific smile.

"Afternoon," said Curio.

"It's been a beautiful day, hasn't it?" said Trio.

"True enough," said Curio. "Had a nice walk?"

“Amazing,” said Trio. His pupils were wide and blank. Not for the first time, Curio wondered if it was possible to get too much nature. Curio had seen that look before, on his father, who was currently being kept in a sanctuary near Isca Dumnoniarum for his own safety.

“Great,” he said. “Any idea where we’re stopping for the night?”

“I don’t know,” said Trio. “We’ll see when we see.”

Curio tried to move into Trio’s line of sight, and ended up walking backwards in front of him.

“Right,” he said. “But the sun’s setting. We probably won’t find another inn before the light goes. I’ll ask the soldier guy to turn us back, shall I?”

Trio frowned slightly. “I don’t think we can do that,” he said. “We need to push on, don’t we? We need to get to Verulamium early tomorrow if you want to be ready for your performance.”

Curio stumbled and dropped his bag.

“What?” he said, picking it up.

“Our first show is tomorrow,” said Trio. “Nasica himself wants to watch you perform.” He raised his eyebrows, as if the name was meant to mean something.

“Great,” said Curio. “Only, you haven’t told us what we’re performing.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem, should it?” said Trio. His customary worry lines returned. “I heard Pavo say that you did a completely new play every day.”

“Yes, but...” Curio’s mind was filled with objections, not the least of which was that Trio was listening to anything coming out of Pavo’s mouth - “...but that’s because we’re doing it by ourselves. If you’re telling us what to do, it’s going to take a lot longer.”

“Really? I thought it would be quicker with supervision.”

“You’d think so, but no,” said Curio.

“Why not?”

Curio tried to shepherd his thoughts together. He wanted to construct a reason for Trio to let them stay at the inn. He also needed to explain how theatre worked. Neither problem was easy, and his brain insisted on doing both. He blinked hard.

“The thing is, we build up our plays from little pieces that we use again and again. So we’re always using the same kind of characters and jokes and bits of business. If you’re telling us what to do, then we won’t be using our normal bits, so it’s going to take up a lot more time to make a play. On the other hand, if you have a script, we could memorise it, if we were somewhere well-lit and comfortable...”

“I’m afraid I don’t have a script. Pavo said you didn’t need one. We’ll just have to make the play up tomorrow morning.”

“That’s not going to be easy.”

“Well,” said Trio. “At least we have powerful inspiration.”

“Really?”

Trio put his palms together, and looked upwards.

“Right,” said Curio.

He trudged to the back of the wagon, and hauled himself up to watch the sun go down. Pavo slowly caught up with the cart. He was clearly exhausted, but he had a puffed out chest and a fake confident stride

“Curio, Curio, Curio,” he said. “Still sitting on the back of that cart? What are you, crippled? Legs broken under the strain of your belly? Exercise, my boy! Exercise!”

Pavo tried to hop up onto the back of the wagon, but his legs didn’t quite have the energy. He ended up lying on his stomach, with his feet dragging on the road. For a

moment Curio thought Pavo had passed out, but eventually his elbows found purchase, and he hauled himself onto the wagon, then flopped over backwards and lay like a fish, staring up with dead eyes.

“Great walk,” he said hoarsely. “Makes me feel like I’ve achieved somethi-” he lost the end of the sentence in spasms of coughing.

“Why do you do it?” asked Curio.

“What do you mean? Fit body, fit mind, fit soul.” Pavo tapped himself on the chest lightly, like a carpenter demonstrating the sturdiness of a new table while worrying that it might fall into splinters. “You should do some walking yourself. You could use a few miles.”

“What are you saying? I’m putting on weight?”

“No, it’s too late for that. It’s your shape that’s the problem. You’re turning into a wheel of cheese.”

“I’m not that bad,” said Curio. He twisted around, trying to see himself from the side. He had to admit that, even when he sucked in his belly, he was wider front-to-back than he was side-to-side.

“Cheer up,” Pavo continued, voice rasping as he gulped in air. “Fat people are meant to be happy.”

Curio prodded Pavo.

“Did you tell the priest we could perform tomorrow?” he said.

“Ouch. Yes.”

“Why?” said Curio. “We won’t have time to rehearse.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Pavo. “We’re not getting paid. We don’t have to be good.”

“You’re happy to put on a bad show?”

“Delighted,” said Pavo, scratching himself. “And you?”

* * * * *

8: NIGHT

The wind whipped up after the sun set, making the leather hood of the wagon rattle. Thick black clouds piled in overhead, as if the world knew the actors would be sleeping outside and wanted to make the experience memorable.

Octa stopped the wagon under a copse of trees by the side of the road, detached the wagon and gave the ox some hay. Pavo slowly began to accept that Curio wasn't joking, and they really weren't stopping at an inn.

“This is lunacy,” he said. “Where are we going to sleep?”

He went looking for Trio, and Curio tagged along because he enjoyed seeing Pavo angry. They found the priest at the side of the road, trying to talk to Octa, who was sitting on a milestone, sharpening his sword in slow, deliberate strokes and spitting on the blade at regular intervals to aid the sharpening.

“So, in your experience, which is better?” Trio was asking. “More than one short shift a night per person?”

“Ptu,” said Octa.

“Smaller guard shifts would be less taxing, I'm sure. What do you normally do?”

“Ptu.”

“I'll tell you what, I'll put you in charge of the guarding roster, shall I?”

“Ptu.”

Pavo cleared his throat.

“Yes?” said Trio.

“Me and my associate here,” said Pavo, indicating Curio rather more formally than Curio thought he deserved, “were wondering what your plans were regarding the sleeping arrangements.”

“Ah, now that is a problem,” said Father Trio, nodding seriously. “The woman.”

“What?” said Pavo.

“The slave girl. I don’t know what we’re going to do with her.”

“Well, obviously, she’s going to sleep outside, isn’t she?” said Pavo.

Alba poked her head out of the back of wagon. Pavo pretended not to see her.

“I mean, you wouldn’t expect us to sleep in the back of the wagon with a dog, would you? And there isn’t enough room in the wagon for all the men, as it is.”

Alba ducked back inside. Curio was the only one watching, so he was the only one who caught the flash of an obscene gesture.

“The only thing for it is to go back and find an inn,” said Pavo.

“Well, no, the thing is, we don’t want to waste our benefactor’s money...”

Curio soon got bored. He let Trio and Pavo’s voices fade away as he watched the whetstone polishing Octa’s sword again, and again, and again. Right, he thought. It was going to be a two-month trip with this lot. A surly soldier, an angry slave, a stubborn priest, and his closest friend; a prat. He went to see what Alba was doing.

* * * * *

9: CURIO AND ALBA

As he reached the wagon, the rain started pouring properly. The inside of the wagon was filled with a warm inviting light. Alba was rummaging through the bags.

“Close that,” said Alba. “It took me ages to get this candle going.”

Curio held the flaps tightly to his body as he squeezed his way in.

“Isn’t that a bit dangerous in here?” he said, pointing to the candle, which Alba had stuck to the top of the props box with its own wax.

“So I can’t be trusted with a candle,” she said, not looking at him.

“What are you looking for?”

“Food,” she said.

Curio nodded.

Normally, he couldn’t stop himself from talking. Most of the time his brain was playing catch-up while his mouth raced ahead. But for some reason his words had evaporated. He was so used to his words coming out unbidden that he had no idea how to think them into existence. He floundered in the silence.

“What are you cooking?” he hazarded.

“That depends. Did any of you remember to bring any meat or vegetables?”

Curio shook his head. “I thought we were going to stay at the inn.”

“And the priest man didn’t think we’d need to bring anything other than a big bag of grain. Genius.”

Curio glanced at the entrance.

“What?” said Alba, not looking up. “You worried he’ll hear?”

“I don’t want to get you into trouble,” he said.

“Why do you care? You’ve got a mouth on you, too.”

Curio was happy she’d noticed.

“I’m just looking out for you,” he said.

“Wonderful. Are you going to buy my freedom?”

“No.”

“Are you going to help me cook supper?”

“No.”

“Well thanks for looking out for me.”

For the first time, Curio noticed how similar Alba was to his old patron Musca. There was no chance that they were related, because by appearance they were barely the same species, but she shared a lot of his mannerisms. Musca must have been training her as an actress for a while. Curio wondered what it must be like to be witty and still be a slave. To have a mind full of quips, and not be allowed to use them. It would drive him mad.

Before Curio could speak again, there was a loud rapping on the side of the wagon. Curio opened the flaps and peered out. Father Trio and Pavo were standing in the rain.

“Can I help you?” asked Curio.

“Out!” said Trio.

“Don’t you want to come in?” Curio asked. The rain was pouring hard, and whipping in the wind.

“No, thank you! Come out!” said Trio.

The priest had an edge of panic in his voice. He craned past Curio to look in the wagon, as if there was something life-threatening inside. Curio hopped down from the wagon into a puddle.

Father Trio pulled apart the flaps to look inside. Alba sat in the candlelight, holding a bunch of carrots.

“This is exactly what I was talking about,” he said to Pavo.

“Carrots?” said Curio.

“No,” said Trio. “Indecency.”

“We were only going to eat them.”

Father Trio frowned.

“I was explaining to your superior here-”

“He’s not my superior,” said Curio.

“I was explaining,” said Trio, “that neither of you should spend any unsupervised time with the slave.”

“What?” said Curio. “Why not?”

“You heard our benefactor. It’s my duty to protect her purity.”

The sound of rummaging from within the wagon stopped.

“Purity?” said Curio.

“Yes,” said Trio.

“Alba’s?” said Curio.

“Yes.”

Curio knew better than to listen to backstage gossip. He always took the talk about who was doing what with whom with a pinch of salt. Nevertheless, there was a pause.

“Our Alba?” Curio said.

“That’s right,” said Trio. “Please, stay away from her unless I’m present.”

“Fine,” said Curio.

“Thank you.” Trio rubbed his hands together for warmth. “I’ll see if Octa is joining us for supper.”

Trio walked off, leaving Curio and Pavo in the rain.

“I know you’re listening, in there,” said Pavo. “I bet you’re enjoying this.”

The silence continued from inside the wagon.

“I don’t know why he doesn’t trust me,” said Curio. “I’m an icon of virtue.”

“Hmmf. I’d rather not be around a slave, anyway.” Pavo sniffed loudly. “Fleas.”

Curio’s boots squelched when he shifted his weight from foot to foot. The only other sound was the rain spattering down onto the wagon’s roof and the leaves all around them.

* * * * *

10: NIGHT

Trio lead them in a prayer, and they all squashed into the back of the wagon for dinner. They couldn’t light a fire outside because of the rain, and the only things Alba had found which didn’t need to be cooked were the carrots and some stale double-baked travel bread. They ate in the dark, because Trio was worried that someone would knock over the candle.

He tried to lighten the mood by asking about people’s families, which just made things worse. Curio’s father was in a sanatorium under the care of monks who said he was possessed by the devil, and Pavo came from a long line of traitors to the Empire. Neither of them wanted to talk much about it, so they all ate the second half of the dinner in silence.

Afterwards, Trio tied the flaps of the wagon closed to seal Alba inside, and went off to take the first guard shift. Octa had his own tent set up a few dozen yards away. Curio and Pavo wrapped themselves up in travel blankets, and lay under the wagon. The rain kept pouring. Water started pooling on the ground under the wagon.

Pavo hit the underside of it with his fist.

“What did you do that for?” asked Curio.

“Just so Alba knows I hate her.”

“It’s not her fault.”

“I don’t care.”

Curio lay as still as he could and hoped that the blankets would somehow get warmer. The rain hissed down all around.

“How much trouble would we get in for killing a priest?” Pavo asked.

* * * * *

11: MORNING

Curio flapped his arm to get the blood flowing, and looked around groggily in the pre-dawn light. Pavo was a cocoon next to him. Curio jabbed him with a finger.

“Morning,” he said.

Pavo made a sound like a goat being slaughtered.

Curio poked him again. The cocoon rolled away, coming to a stop a few feet from the cart.

“Time to get up,” said Curio.

He got onto his knees, crawled out into the open, and stretched until all his joints clicked. Everything hurt. He wandered off to find a bush.

At breakfast, everyone stayed out of each other’s way. Alba made porridge, and they all ate it separately. Trio seemed to be stung that no one had woken up in time for the morning prayers, and he ate alone in the wagon. The soldier had his breakfast on the milestone at the side of the road. Curio had his huddled under one of the few remaining dry blankets, and Alba ate hers by the fire. When they finished, she rinsed the plates and packed them into the travelling basket. Immediately Pavo was up, indignant that they hadn’t saved him any food and grumbling how badly he’d slept.

No one listened. Within the hour they were on the road. They crossed the first hill, and rolled into Verulamium.

At the back of the wagon, Curio and Pavo had a quiet but intense conversation.

“We were this close to town?” hissed Pavo. “This close?”

“It’s not worth it,” said Curio.

“There must be a dozen inns here! We could have slept indoors. I could have had meat!”

Curio liked having Pavo around for times like these. He got angry enough for both of them.

“Trio’s got to die,” Pavo hissed. “I’d cut off his balls but I don’t think he uses them.”

* * * * *

12: VERULAMIUM

Like many British towns, Verulamium had grown far beyond its own walls. The wagon rattled through a ramshackle district of mud huts. There weren’t many people around, other than a stocky woman weeding a vegetable patch and a swineherd whacking a huge sow along the overgrazed roadside. Three old men sat on a low wall, silently watching the wagon trundle past.

Things only started to get busy nearer the gates. There was a market on in the town, and as the wagon entered it got wedged between a pair of slow-moving carts dragged by elderly oxen. Hawkers with broad Catuvellaunian accents went from cart to cart offering cheap religious icons and worm-pocked fruit. Pavo shouted them away.

Despite all the activity, Curio couldn't help feeling homesick. The buildings weren't tall enough, the streets weren't narrow enough, the vendors weren't pushy enough. Even the noise wasn't loud enough. Everything was cleaner, cheaper, and newer. Even the light seemed brighter. This wasn't his home.

There was shouting from ahead of them, and the ox cart in front came to a stop. Curio dropped off the back of the wagon and wandered ahead to see what was up.

A pair of foot-soldiers were blocking the traffic, waiting for an expensive-looking litter to pass. It was thoroughly over-elaborate, with green curtains embroidered with birds and flowers, engraved oak carrying-poles, and tassels on every corner. It also had a peaked roof, two flags, and a cherub as a figurehead. Curio could make out the silhouette of a single occupant through the curtains. Whoever it was either had an extraordinary hairstyle or was carrying a swan on her head.

"Come on!" a voice warbled from inside. "Hurry up! Chop chop!"

The litter disappeared down the road, and the foot-soldiers waved the queue of carts forward.

Curio approached one of the soldiers.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"Nasica's wife," said the soldier, and spat on the ground. "Bloody Roman."

Curio jumped off the wagon to get directions. He showed the soldiers a letter with Primus's official seal, and one of them reluctantly agreed to show them the way.

They made their way into the town. The congestion got worse as they approached the forum. After a long wait at a blocked intersection, the soldier changed direction and took them on a roundabout route around the west of the town and towards the Verulamium theatre.

It was almost three stories high, far taller than the surrounding shops and stables. It was huge and semi-circular, plastered dark red, with jutting-out entranceways at the front and sides, and a courtyard and stables backstage. The seats of the auditorium were hidden inside, but the roof covering the stage was visible between the bare flag poles at the top of the curved wall.

Curio looked up at it in wonder. The building was twice the size of Musca's theatre. It would be an amazing place to perform.

"Don't get your hopes up," said Pavo.

"Why not?" said Curio.

The soldier picked up the pace as they passed the theatre, and showed no signs of stopping. Octa gave the oxen's buttocks a smart rap with a stick to keep up. A powerful odour filled the air.

"What the hell is that smell?" said Curio.

Pavo pointed up. There was a wooden staircase on the outside wall of the theatre. A man in a brown cloak was balancing at the top, upending a sack of out bones, peelings, and rotten leftovers into the auditorium.

"What's he doing?" asked Curio.

The man finished emptying his sack, and turned it inside out to wipe off the last pieces of scrap.

"He's trashing the theatre!" said Curio, grabbing Pavo's arm. "What's he doing? He can't do that!"

"The theatre's a big pit in the centre of town," said Pavo. "And these people needed a dump."

A more piercing scent cut through the smell of the garbage. Brown patches around the theatre doors showed that they were being used as a public urinal.

“They trashed their theatre? It’s a sin!”

Pavo lifted up a shoulder in a half-shrug. It wasn’t affecting Pavo directly, so he didn’t care.

“It’s like destroying a temple!” said Curio.

Father Trio raised a finger.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Temples to anything but our Lord are forbidden.”

“I didn’t mean an actual temple,” said Curio.

“Even so,” said Trio. He raised his chin.

Curio showed his palms in surrender.

At the end of the block, the foot-soldier led them to a tall gateway that was blocked by a metal grating. Next to the gate was a stick tied to a piece of twine. The soldier hit the stick on the grating until a steward appeared on the other side.

“Hail Constantine. Hail Britain. Lord be with you,” said the soldier.

“Alright, alright,” said the steward, unlatching the gate. He had sunken eyes and uneven teeth. “What do you need?”

The foot soldier tilted his head at the wagon.

“Actors for you,” he said.

“Right,” said the steward, pulling open the grating. Having done his duty, the soldier flipped them a lazy salute, and walked back towards the centre of town.

On the other side of the gate was an empty patch of ground with high walls built around it. It was mainly bare soil, with patches of grass and sand.

“What is this place?” asked Trio as the wagon rolled in.

“Field of Jupiter,” said the steward.

“You shouldn’t name the old gods,” said Trio.

“What am I meant to call it?” said the steward. “It’s what it is.”

“Then I don’t think this is the right place to put on a holy play,” said Trio.

“I know,” said the steward, shaking his head. “I was hoping for a gladiator fight, or at least a decent execution. It’s a shame, is what it is.” He frowned. “Here, I heard that sometimes you kill condemned criminals on stage as part of the play? Like, if you need a really realistic death on stage? Is that true?”

“No,” said Trio.

“Shame,” said the steward. He closed the grating, and left the wagon to roll across the field.

Curio looked around their performance space. It was an uneven patch of ground, about sixty by forty paces. Against the far wall were tiered benches, three rows high. There was a man-height wooden barrier in front of the seats, presumably to protect the audience from gladiators. In some places the seating had rotted through to expose the wooden scaffolding. The only new thing about the seating area was a newly-constructed dignitaries box in the centre. Against its rear wall were two life-sized sculptures of naked ladies draped in veils. Between them was a huge round shield, boldly displaying an emblem of a dragon against a bright red background, along with another naked lady. The walls and roof of the box were draped in purple tapestries, embroidered with stylised birds and outlined with gold thread. There were tassels. The dignitaries box and the litter that Curio had seen earlier had almost definitely been made for the same person.

A small group of slaves were carrying a pair of recliner couches up to the dignitaries box, directed by a senior slave with a gold necklace to show his status. As Trio dropped down from the wagon, the senior slave approached and saluted.

“Father Trio? Well met. I’m Marcus, personal slave of *comes* Nasica. The *comes* is pleased to welcome you. I trust you had a safe and pleasant journey?”

“Very pleasant,” said Trio.

Behind him, Pavo had a coughing fit.

“Good,” said the slave. “The *comes* hopes you’re prepared. I’ve marked in your performance to start in the ninth hour. That gives you three hours to prepare. I assume that’ll be enough.”

“Our most humble thanks,” said Trio.

“You’re welcome. Now, if you will excuse us, I have to put in the *comes*’ couches, and inform the town crier.”

“The crier?” said Trio. “What for?”

“We have to announce that the play,” said the slave.

Curio dropped off the back of the wagon.

“Uh, what for?” he said. “I thought it would be a private show.”

“It was,” said the slave, “But the *comes* is generously extending the audience. It’ll be free for all citizens.”

Curio closed his eyes. Three hours to prepare. With only three actors. On practically no sleep. For a large audience. With a priest in charge. It would have been all right if they’d only been performing for the nobility, who didn’t throw things. But with an open audience, it was going to be hell.

Trio thanked the slave, and turned to the actors with his fingers steeped in excitement.

“All right!” he said. “Let’s make theatre!”

* * * * *

13: REHEARSAL

As they were unloading the wagon, Curio almost killed himself. He was pulling out the chest that Primus had given Trio in order to get to the props and costumes boxes. It was heavier than he expected, and as he got it over the lip it slid down, out of control. He yelped and threw himself under it, catching it on his hip. It began to crush the lower half of his body. He felt muscles in his back tearing, and the end of the chest was about to drop off the wagon and flatten him.

“Help!” he called.

Pavo saw what was happening, and took a step back for a better view. One of two corners of the chest slid off the wagon, and the it twisted out of his control. As it was about to fall, Octa the soldier reached in and took the chest under his arm. He lifted it and slid it back into the wagon, gave Curio a warning glare, and went off to sit on the audience stands.

Curio tried to massage the muscles on his own back.

“What’s in there, anyway?” he said. “Gold bars?”

“Oh, stop whining,” said Pavo. “What about me? I’m tired, I didn’t sleep, I haven’t had any food...”

Alba leant out of the wagon and bounced a piece of twine up and down in front of their faces.

“What the hell are you doing?” said Pavo.

“Oh, sorry, I thought you were a pair of kittens. It was the way you were mewling. But now I see you’re a pair of big strong men. My mistake.”

She disappeared back into the darkness.

“I like her,” said Curio.

“Shut up,” said Pavo.

They pulled the props trunks and the clothing sacks into the centre of the field and started unpacking.

“No, no,” said Trio, looking into one of the open crates. “You can put these back.”

“What?” said Curio.

“These,” said Trio. Inside the crate was Curio’s collection of comedy codpieces that could be strapped on and flashed at an audience for a cheap laugh. It was a substantial collection, and included cocks for every occasion: Bendy, thin, veiny, stubby, spring-loaded, circumcised, bright red, or green (for venereal disease).

“The audience loves them,” said Curio.

“That doesn’t matter. They’re obscene. We’re here to educate.”

“Some of these are quite educational,” said Curio.

“No,” said Trio. “Put them away.”

Next out were the costumes. They laid them out on the ground at Trio’s request, avoiding a tremendous cowpat that the ox had deposited on the field, so that he could see what they had to work with.

“They’re all rather tatty,” he said.

“Well, they’re mostly slave costumes,” said Curio.

“That’s no good. We don’t want to put on a play about slaves.”

“Most of our plays are about slaves,” said Curio.

“Why?” said Trio.

“I don’t know. People like slaves.”

“Mostly,” said Pavo, glaring at Alba.

“You must have some other characters,” said Trio.

“Absolutely. This is for an old man,” said Curio, pointing to a white gown.

Trio examined it.

“It’s stained,” he said.

“Well, the old man is normally a bit - not entirely continent,” said Curio.

“And that purple robe?” said Trio.

“That’s for the rich boy. He’s a bit of a womaniser. That’s why the robe’s got all those sparkles.”

“No, no, no. What about a soldier? You must have a soldier character?”

“Over there,” said Curio. He pointed at a soldier’s tunic. It was covered in wooden medals.

“Do you have any costumes for any dignified members of society? Anyone that the audience can relate to?”

“Yes,” said Curio. “The slaves.”

In the end, Trio decided that they needed to pray for guidance. They kneeled in a circle, and Trio closed his eyes and started mumbling. After almost an hour of this, Curio and Pavo were all shooting each other meaningful looks. While no one could deny that they needed divine help on an epic scale, they were also running out of time and they still needed a play.

In the end there were no rehearsals, just some tense negotiations between Trio and the actors, during which they hammered out a compromised plot that wasn’t acceptable to anyone. Before they could give it a run-through to check that it made sense, Trio insisted on one more prayer, which only finished as the gates swung open and the first of the audience began filing in. Curio went into the corner of the field to dry-wretch.

Pavo came up behind him and put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

“You’re a wimp,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“Get over it! No one knows us. Who cares if it’s rubbish?”

Curio cared. He got stage-fright even at the best of times, and the thought of going on stage without a plan was nightmarish. But in the immediate sense, Pavo was right. They weren’t in Londinium. They could hide their shame behind their masks. They could go to a tavern afterwards, get drunk, and leave town before anyone could find out who they were. They just had to get through it.

“Oh, by the way,” said Pavo. “Trio says we can’t use the masks.”

Curio threw up.

* * * * *

14: THE AUDIENCE

As the audience entered the gates they were directed in an orderly fashion around the edge of the field by a detail of soldiers, who were evenly spaced, like flags, to mark the path to the stands. Curio wiped his mouth and watched the procession.

“Efficient,” he said.

“They have to be,” said Pavo. “It looks like they do regular cock-fights here.”

Curio had noticed the small bones and disembodied beaks trodden into the soil of the field. The cocks had either been entertaining, or they’d died. Either way, Curio envied them.

There was a blast of horns from the gates, and a nobleman arrived, surrounded by his entourage. He was a middle-aged man, bald but not unfit, and he acknowledged the cheering audience with a raised hand. Curio guessed this must be the *comes* Nasica, and next to him was a woman who, from the size of her hairstyle, was his

wife. Keeping a respectful distance behind them was a train of lesser dignitaries and functionaries. Surrounding the procession were two rows of soldiers, their shields facing out to display Nasica's personal crest, a maiden and a dragon.

Nasica and his wife went to the dignitaries box, and everyone else found space around them on the audience stands. The soldiers closed the main gate. The crowd was ready.

Curio, Pavo and Trio went to hide behind the wagon. Alba was already there, in her young-noblewoman-in-distress costume.

"It's not too late for us to commit suicide," said Curio.

Trio looked aghast. "That's a sin!"

"Don't worry. He was just making a joke," said Pavo.

"I wasn't."

"It's a terrible thing to say," said Trio. A bead of sweat ran down his temple.

"You must have more faith. The play will go perfectly."

"How do you know?" said Curio.

Trio gave him a look, like a teacher to a student who just wasn't applying himself.

"We prayed," he said. "Twice."

* * * * *

15: THE PLAY

Whenever Curio looked back on that performance, his only memories were in slow motion, like the time he'd almost drowned.

The plot they used was loosely based on an old favourite: A slave is left in charge of the master's teenage son while the master is away. The son falls in love with a slave-girl and buys her freedom, and when the master returns, the slave does his best to convince the old man that the son wasn't wasting all his money or messing around with girls. There's a lot of cross-talk and double-entendres, and at the end, a rich friend of the son's pays off the debt, the old man forgives the slave and everyone lives happily ever after. They'd used this set-up a dozen times before and knew it backwards, but in the new circumstances it took a lot of strain.

For one thing, the play had six male characters and they only had two male actors, which meant more costume changes than the audience could tolerate. It also meant that they couldn't show certain characters meeting other characters if those characters were being played by the same actor.

And that was before Trio's changes. For one thing, he insisted that the old man could not be shown in a disrespectful manner, which was pretty much the entire joke of the play. They had to cut out the scenes where the slave bamboozled the master, which meant chopping away two thirds of the plot. The missing time was easily filled up, though, because Trio insisted that there should be long monologues expressing the correct moral position at every step of the way.

Curio loved improvising, but during the seventh time he was forced to stand in front of a glass-eyed audience and spin another elaboration on the words "lying is wrong," he hit a wall. A billion jokes filled his skull, none of which were even vaguely suitable in the circumstances. He corpsed. The coughing and muttering of the audience built up into full-blown shouting. A crust of bread flew past his head.

"Silence!" came a shout from the dignitaries box.

The soldiers lined up between the actors and the audience started rattling their spears. At first, Curio thought they were threatening the actors as well, but the audience calmed down and the rattling stopped. Pavo stepped out from behind the wagon to smugly save the day with an insincere speech about civic virtue.

Seventeen costume changes, twelve monologues, four corpses and three more spear-rattles later, the play came to an end. Curio, as the slave, was led off to the gallows, Pavo's boy character joined a seminary, and Alba's girl went back to being a slave. A happy ending, according to Father Trio.

Even though Pavo's final lines were "So ends our play, and we bid you all a blessed day," the audience seemed confused about whether the play was actually over. They waited until the soldiers opened the gates and blew their horns, and then quietly filed out of their seats.

Father Trio sent Alba to hide in the wagon, for modesty's sake, and joined Curio and Pavo to watch the departing audience.

"Well done," he said. "I have a couple of notes for next time, but I think they got the message."

"Really?" said Curio. "You don't think we were too subtle?"

The irony flew over Trio's head. "No," he said. "I think it was all right."

Nasica's personal slave came up to them.

"The *comes* extends his congratulations for a most worthy play," he said diplomatically. "He invites you to join him this evening at his villa, where he will be celebrating the birthday of his charming wife Lydia, starting at sunset."

"I would be honoured," said Father Trio.

"And feel free to bring your men, too," said the slave.

"Thank you," said Trio.

The slave looked at Curio.

“And he thoroughly recommends the local bathhouse,” he said.

* * * * *

16: THE PARTY

An hour in the town baths made a difference. Curio got himself washed, oiled, scraped and shaved, and the unpleasant memory of the play slowly started to fade. As they rolled out of town and towards Nasica’s villa in the north, he had to admit to himself that the landscape was beautiful. The old forests had been chopped down centuries before and replaced by a patchwork of orchards, fields and vineyards. The sun was setting and the light caught beams of dust between the vine rows. As the wagon rode bumpily down the track, Curio reached out and plucked a handful of grapes, taking care not to be spotted by Trio, who would probably consider it theft. He wanted to share them with Alba, but she was up on the front of the wagon with Octa and Trio.

Nasica’s slave greeted them again at the front entrance of the villa.

“You’re early,” he said to Trio, and led their ox wagon around the outer wall towards a side-gate into the stable-yard. Some horses poked their heads over the top of the stable door and huffed at them while Octa unhitched the wagon from the ox.

“Should we bring anything?” asked Trio.

“Just your slave to serve you. And your men’s instruments, obviously.”

“What was that?” said Pavo, poking his head around the side of the wagon.

“The *Comes* was hoping you’d be willing to provide the evening’s entertainment. Your men play, don’t they?”

Curio and Pavo looked at each other. They did play, more or less. Most of the people they knew ended up playing something or other to pass the time between drinks. Pavo had bought a poncy thin white flute, and Curio had a lute that was missing a string and had a crack on the side from when he'd hit someone with it in a fight. He'd brought it along to give himself something to do on the journey. A fireside sing-a-long was always a laugh, especially with Curio's lyrics, which weren't always accurate but were always memorable. But neither of them would call themselves musicians.

"They'll be delighted," said Trio.

Curio rooted between the bags in the back of the wagon until he found their instruments. When he got back out, Nasica's slave was trying to lure Octa down from his seat at the front of the wagon.

"We have fully furnished soldiers quarters for the guards. You're welcome to rest and freshen up."

Octa nodded slowly, taking this in, then turned away and stared off into the distance.

The slave edged towards Trio.

"Does he, uh, understand what I'm saying? Does he speak Latin?"

"Octa's got his own special orders," said Trio. He called up to Octa. "This place is safe! You don't have to worry about the wagon."

"No," said Octa. He spat, and looked back into the distance.

"Or maybe he doesn't," said Trio.

"We could drag him down," said Pavo.

Curio looked at Octa's knuckles.

“Or we could let him get on with whatever he’s doing,” said Curio. “Shall we do that? Let’s do that.”

The slave showed them through a well-tended garden in the villa’s rear. They strolled between an elaborate water feature and some flowerbeds, towards the building’s main section. There was some construction in progress along the far courtyard wall. From the look of it, Nasica was building a new women’s wing. Piles of masonry spilled over into the path.

“This way, please,” said the slave, ushering them through the rear entrance of the banquet hall.

It was a large room, warm, extravagant and brightly lit. New tapestries hung on every wall, and candelabras hung down from the vaulted roof. The room was dominated by a central table, with a dozen diagonal eating couches arranged around it. Cooks were laying out the first course of a meal - appetisers like smoked meats, salads and a tray of roast dormice. One slave boy was lighting the candles with a taper, and another was lining up amphorae of wine against the wall. Curio started salivating so hard that the sides of his tongue hurt.

“Here’s your place,” said the slave, pointing to one of the couches. “I’m sure it won’t be long before the *comes* and the rest of his guests arrive.”

“So we were very early?” Trio asked.

“Remarkably early,” said the slave, nodding.

“Oh,” said Trio. He perched himself on the corner of his couch and locked his fingers together.

Curio and Pavo sat down on the couches. The slave hurried over to them.

“Your stage is over there,” he said, pointing towards a semi-circular platform in the corner of the room furthest from the fireplace. “Can I recommend taking a moment to tune up?”

“But... food?” said Curio.

“You’ll be fed after the main course, along with the servants and slaves.” He beckoned to Alba. “You. Girl. Come with me,”

The slave led her away towards the kitchens.

Curio and Pavo went and stood over Trio.

“Tell him we’re not your servants,” said Pavo.

Trio looked up at them anxiously.

“I’m sort of in charge of you,” he said.

“We’re hungry,” said Curio.

“Yes, but we’re their guests... I don’t want to rock the boat...” said Trio.

Pavo put his hand down on the table, and leaned over the priest.

“You’re not going to get us on this table, is that right?”

“I’m sorry,” said Trio, pulling in his neck like a tortoise. “I can’t.”

“Fine,” said Pavo, straightening up. “Come on, Curio.” He walked off towards the stage.

“But...” said Curio.

“I said come on!”

As they walked away, Pavo slipped a smoked pigeon drumstick that he’d taken from the table out of his sleeve, and bit into it.

“Did you get me one?” asked Curio.

“Steal your own damned food,” said Pavo.

They sat on the edge of the stage and watched the food getting colder. Curio half-heartedly tuned his lute. After an hour there was the distant racket, like the sound of thirty people all singing different songs simultaneously. Boots thudded as men stormed in through the main entrance and into the villa, and Nasica burst in through the hall's main doors with both fists raised in the air.

"Let the feast commence!" he said in a voice that echoed off the walls.

Men in party clothes tumbled into the room behind Nasica. Curio looked at Pavo, who nodded, and they started playing a popular bawdy ballad without the lyrics. As they played, Curio watched Nasica walking around the room, chatting with people, slapping his friends on the back and laughing. After being kept waiting, Curio wanted to dislike Nasica, but he had to admit that the man had a presence. The moment he entered the room, there was no doubt that they were at a party.

"Priest!" cried Nasica, spotting Trio who was still perched on the corner of his couch with his leg jiggling to ward off pins and needles. Trio jumped to his feet, and Nasica kissed him on both cheeks.

"Everybody! This is the priest who brought that play today!" said Nasica, putting an arm over Trio's shoulders. There were groans, the hiss of people sucking air through their teeth.

"No, no, no," said Nasica. "Noble intentions, noble intentions." He patted Trio on the chest with his free hand. "Come!" he said. "Let's eat!"

The guests descended onto the couches and began to pick at the food. As they sat, Trio whispered something into Nasica's ear. Nasica nodded, and stood.

"You all ought to be ashamed of yourselves!" he said, in a booming voice.

The noise in the room dipped, and all eyes turned to Nasica.

"The priest has reminded me," he said, "that not one of you said grace!"

There were more groans.

“Enough! Father, please, won’t you lead us in prayer?”

Several guests shot each other glances. Trio closed his eyes and started reciting the standard dinner prayer.

As Trio spoke, Nasica looked around the room to make sure that everyone was watching him. With a smirk he touched a finger to his lips, and then reached to the table and picked up a roasted dormouse. There were titters from around the table. He slowly brought the dormouse to his mouth, glancing at Trio like a naughty child, and started peeling the meat off it. By now, the whole room was giggling. Trio finished the prayer and opened his eyes.

“Thank you, father!” said Nasica, hiding the mouse behind his back. “And I’m ashamed of the rest of you. Show our guest some respect!”

“Thank you,” said Trio.

“You’re welcome,” said Nasica, and drew his arm out from behind his back. Looking Trio directly in the eyes, he lifted the mouse and took a final bite out of it. Trio’s mouth moved silently, and the room collapsed in laughter. Curio was impressed. Nasica knew how to work a crowd.

The talking picked up again. Curio could pick up conversations in Latin and local Catuvellaunian, which he couldn’t understand. Until he was five years old he’d spoken Dumnonian, which was a similar dialect, but he hadn’t heard or spoken it since he’d moved to Londinium. Still, there was something about the Catuvellaunian sounds and rhythms that Curio found comforting.

At Curio’s suggestion, they started playing an old British folk song. Pavo sneered, but it was met with approval, and there was a lot of stamping of feet and singing along amongst the party guests.

When the song was over Nasica beckoned to the wine-slaves, and pointed them towards the stage. They approached Curio and Pavo with two full goblets of wine.

Curio could have wept. He raised his goblet to Nasica, who caught his eye and nodded. The wine was the best thing that had happened to Curio all day. He sat on the edge of the stage, rested his elbows on his lute, and sipped it slowly, letting the beautiful taste wash around his mouth.

At the main table, the slaves finished pouring the drinks. "Point someone out if you please, Father," said Nasica.

"Sorry?" said Trio.

"Choose someone at the table."

"Uh..." said Trio. He pointed out a man opposite. "Him?" he said. "Is that all right?"

"Tuditanus?" said Nasica. "Good choice! T-V-D-I-T-A-N-V-S." he counted off the letters on his fingers. "Nine letters. Nine drinks! Nine drinks, everybody!"

With a ragged cheer, the table raised their goblets and took swig after swig, calling out the number between each one. Trio hesitated.

"Down it goes!" said Nasica.

Trio lifted his goblet and took a cautious sip. There were giggles. "Come on!" said Nasica. "You're from Londinium! Show us how it's done!"

Trio took a gulp, and coughed. His eyes started streaming.

"That's more like it!" said Nasica. "One!"

The whole room cheered Trio on as he made his way through the next eight swigs. He nearly choked on the last three. The slaves came around and refilled the goblets, and brought out a box of dice.

"We shouldn't gamble," said Trio.

“It’s only gambling if you can win something,” said Nasica. “In this game, we can only lose.”

He rolled the dice and started the drinking game. The main rule seemed to be that if you didn’t know what was going on, you had to drink. And Trio didn’t have any idea what was going on.

An hour into the drinking game there were more shouts from the front entrance of the villa, and a loud group of noblewomen stumbled into the room. They wore evening gowns of every colour from every dye-merchant across both empires, and were talking over each other in slurring arguments. Around them was a team of stone-faced bodyguards, and at their head was Nasica’s wife. She stalked over to her husband, who was pounding Trio on the back as he finished emptying the contents of his stomach into a spittoon.

“Where were you?” said the wife in a clipped Roman accent.

Nasica ignored her, and kept patting Trio on the back.

“I’m all right, I’m all right,” said Trio.

“I told you to meet us at Lentula’s, didn’t I?” Her nostrils flared.

“I’m sure you didn’t want me around there, spoiling your birthday,” said Nasica.

“No. You managed to do that from here!”

Any sympathy Curio might have felt for the woman was destroyed by her voice, which sounded like a set of unoiled hinges. The men in the room were watching to see how Nasica would handle this challenge to his authority, but he kept on calmly patting Trio in the back. The priest spat weakly.

“That was meant to be my birthday feast!” Screeched Nasica’s wife.

“It still is.”

“There’s nothing left!” she said, pointing to the remains of the meal strewn across the table.

“It’s not my fault if you’re late for your own birthday.”

Some of the men in the room started giggling. The wife was losing. Nasica had the room.

“I ordered those partridges specially!”

“And they were delicious.”

“Why are you trying to ruin my birthday?”

“Ruin it? You’re the one who’s shouting.”

The wife looked around for support, but the women were joining their husbands or pretending not to notice what was going on. There was nothing else she could do.

“Drinks!” she called out, clapping her hands. A slave brought her a glass decanter of mulberry wine. She retreated to the corner with her entourage, who rallied around her sympathetically now that the fight was over.

Alba refilled Curio’s drink. He wished he could talk to her, but she was on her best slave behaviour, and was keeping her eyes down and her mouth closed.

“Is the food ready?” he asked. She nodded towards the kitchen.

“Thanks,” he said.

One of the guests, a thin man with long hair and acne scarring, blocked Alba as she walked back to the table. He leaned in close.

“Got something for me, darling?”

Alba tried to sidestep him, but he moved with her.

“Just trying to be friendly,” he leered.

Curio heart sank. In this place, at this time, he didn’t want to start a fight. Why did other people have to find Alba attractive?

“I can give you mulberry wine,” said Alba, offering the decanter. The guest pushed it away.

“You know what I mean.”

Alba tried to back away, but he hooked her around the waist and pulled her against him.

Alba stayed calm.

“Sir, I’m not your property.”

“Ha!” said the guest, groping. “I’m sure your master won’t mind, we’re all friends here!”

Bugger, thought Curio. *I’m going to get arrested for this*. As he was stepping forward and adjusting his grip on the neck of his lute, a voice shouted across the room.

“You let her go this instant!”

The guest turned to see Trio, who was standing and trembling with anger.

“What? She’s not your slave, is she?”

“No!” said Trio. “She’s my *responsibility!*”

Trio said the word with such earnestness that there were giggles from around the room. He strode forward and stood under the guest’s nose, his face white with fury.

“She’s the property of Marcus Equitus Primus, under my guardianship as a member of the church! Now get your hands off her!”

“Calm down,” said the clerk. “Just having some fun.”

He jiggled Alba’s left breast from side to side.

There was a loud crack. It reverberated off the walls and silenced the room. The guest raised his hand to his cheek, where a red handprint was forming.

“I told you to *let her go!*” said Trio.

Alba backed away. Behind Trio, every man who was sober enough to stand up, stood. The wives who tried to hold them back were pushed aside.

“He slapped me!” said the guest, his amazement tuning to fury. “The bloody Roman *slapped me!*”

A dozen men circled Trio, and held his hands behind his back. Trio disappeared into a forest of expensive tunics and exercised muscle.

“Apologise,” said the guest.

“No,” came Trio’s voice.

The guest pulled back a fist.

“I said apologise!”

There was a brief silence from inside the circle, then Trio’s voice said:

“You first.”

The guest’s knuckles whitened, but before he could strike, someone started laughing. Reclining on his couch, with his head on the backrest, Nasica clapped his hands slowly.

“Well done that man. See that, boys? The legendary Roman stubbornness. Let him go, Rocatos.”

The guest floundered. “But...”

“Now.”

For an instant, Nasica’s warm joviality broke, and Curio could see the iron beneath. There was no doubt why Nasica was the leader. The men holding Trio’s arms let go.

“Master,” said Rocatos. He backed away, bowing, and walked off with his eyes lingering on Trio.

Now the excitement was over, Curio felt his hunger returning. He put down the lute and started exploring the corridors of the villa, looking for the kitchens. After several wrong turns, he heard a giggle. He looked around a corner, and saw Nasica's wife pinning someone against the corridor wall.

"I've heard all kinds of stories about actors," she was saying. As she leaned in, her oversized hairstyle flopped to the side, revealing a trapped Pavo.

"Well, people will talk, I suppose," he said, looking worried.

"I heard that working in the theatre gives you wonderful, ah, opportunities with your audience."

The wife giggled. Pavo looked over her shoulder and spotted Curio.

"Curio!" he called out. "Come and join us! God, please come and join us!"

Nasica's wife turned her head to shoot Curio a venomous look. He smiled.

"Forgive my rudeness, ma'am," he said. "I'm expected for dinner in the kitchens."

"Go," she said, pointing him further down the corridor.

"Much obliged," said Curio, hurrying past them.

"Actually, I was also on my way—" said Pavo. Nasica's wife cut him short by pushing one of her legs between his.

"But we were having such a lovely talk!" she said, putting her mouth close to his ear. "So how did a nice Roman boy like you end up in the theatre?"

Curio helped himself to leftovers in the kitchen, and when he was done, one of the cooks gave him directions to the exterior courtyard where he could relieve himself.

It was dark outside. The moon was blocked by clouds, but the night air was refreshing. The subtle scents of Londinium, manure and fish and the river Themesis

had been the background of his life for years, and now they were gone, replaced by the smell of night flowers in the courtyard. The wine and the food in Curio's body comforted him and made him forget the pain of the day. He began to feel optimistic about travelling, and getting to see the rest of Britain. He'd met people who'd visited distant lands before, and they always spoke about their travels enthusiastically, as if convincing themselves that leaving everything important and going halfway around the world to some shit-hole without sewers was a good idea. It was the same kind of enthusiasm as a newly-married fifteen-year-old explaining to his friends why staying at home looking after his wife and child and not going out to get drunk was so wonderful. And now Curio was feeling it. It was a world of possibility.

He found his way to the stable-yard. loosened his belt-twine and took aim at the dung-heap. A blade edge pushed against his throat, and someone whispered "Shhh."

Curio's throat constricted. The muscles in his groin tightened. He might never be able to pee again.

"Hands," said the voice behind him. Curio raised his hands. He had to bend his knees outwards like a frog to stop his trousers from falling down. A huge hand spun Curio around. He peered at his assailant.

"Octa?" he asked.

"Actor," Octa grumbled. He lowered the knife.

"What the hell are you doing?" Curio asked hitching himself into his trousers and tying the twine.

"Protecting," said Octa.

"What's going on here?" said a voice from the inner gate. Someone was approaching, carrying a candle. Octa raised his knife again.

"Stand down, soldier," said Nasica.

“Not soldier,” Octa said. “Saxon.” He sheathed his knife in a fluid motion.

Nasica came up and examined Octa’s face.

“A Saxon mercenary? I thought you were all meant to be up in the north, guarding Hadrian’s wall. What are you doing out here?” he asked.

“Guarding,” said Octa. “Orders.”

Octa pointed to the shabby wagon. Even in candlelight, it looked worthless.

“You must be exhausted,” said Nasica. “We have patrols all through the night. I assure you, your wagon is safe. Why don’t you go and get some sleep? We’ll put you up in the soldiers quarters.”

Octa stood still.

“That’s an order from a *comes*, Saxon.”

Nasica pointed back through the inner gate. Reluctantly, Octa picked up his travel bag, and walked towards the villa.

Nasica turned to Curio.

“And you? What are you doing here?”

For one of the rare times in his life, Curio felt bashful.

“I was, uh, looking for the bathrooms, sir.”

“Came to piss on my dung heap, did you? Don’t blame you.”

Nasica leaned against the side of the wagon.

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Curio, sir.”

“That’s a Roman name.”

“It’s from a character in one of our plays. My family name is Imbicatos. From Isca Dumnoniarum.”

“Dumnonian. Good.” Nasica nodded to himself. Curio waited. His bladder was still full, but he didn’t want to say anything.

“So, you’re doing a tour of Britain? Is that normal for you actors?”

“It’s new to me, sir.”

Nasica tapped the side of the wagon with his fingertips. “And you’ve been sent by Primus, is that right? Is he a fan of the theatre?”

“No, sir,” said Curio.

“Hmm,” said Nasica.

Curio wasn’t used to talking freely to the nobles. Even Musca, who was the most approachable rich person that Curio had known, never got closer to the actors than hurling some good-natured abuse.

“Primus is up to something. He’s falling out of favour. You know that, don’t you?”

“No, sir,” said Curio.

“I’m sure you sensed it. You’re an actor. You’re used to watching people.” He looked at Curio, and his eyes glinted in the candlelight.

“Big things are happening in this country,” he said. “Keep an eye out. When you come back this way, I’d like to know what you’ve seen. Can you do that for me? Imbicatos?”

Nasica put a hand on Curio’s arm.

“Yes, sir,” said Curio.

“Good. I’m not asking you to spy. Just... keep your eyes open.”

As soon as Nasica went back inside, Curio rushed to the dung heap, lowered his trousers again and let loose, sighing with relief. As he was walking back to the villa, one of the bushes in the flowerbed rustled.

“Psst!” it said.

Curio looked between the branches.

“Pavo?” he asked.

“Is she gone?” Pavo asked in a hoarse whisper.

“Who? The wife?” Curio looked around. “I haven’t seen her.”

“Good,” said Pavo.

There was a long pause.

“Are you coming out?” asked Curio.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’m caught on a rosebush.”

“Need a hand?”

“You’ll rip my shirt.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Yes you will. You have no respect for fashion.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Your clothes.”

In the dark, Curio ran his hand down the front of his tunic.

“I like my clothes.”

“Yes, because you have no respect for fashion.”

“All right,” said Curio. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” said Pavo. “Bring some wine.”

Back in the dining hall. Curio poured two goblets of wine, and brought them over to Nasica’s wife, who was reclining in the corner and talking to her friends.

“He’s waiting for you in the rosebushes,” said Curio, handing her the goblets.

“One for him and one for you.”

“Oh, you sweet boy! Thank you.”

“Just doing my job,” he said, bowing.

* * * * *

17: THE MORNING AFTER

The next morning, things were bad.

The wagon rode through a recently-chopped forest. The sun beat down on them. Trio sat on the front of the wagon next to Octa with his arms crossed, staring ahead with a waxy face.

Pavo wouldn’t talk to Curio, and wasn’t responding to any of Curio’s questions about what had happened with Nasica’s wife. He looked traumatised. Octa wasn’t talking at all, although that was less of a surprise, and Alba was keeping quiet around Trio. With nothing else to do Curio, trotted next to the wagon and tried his best to sweat out his hangover.

By mid-afternoon, Trio perked up enough to tell them about a discussion he’d had with Nasica the night before. He summoned Alba from the back of the wagon, and sat her down next to him on the driving seat to tell her the news.

“Nasica is a great man. He’s a close friend of Emperor Constantine, and last night...” he paused for effect, “...last night, he noticed you.”

Trio looked at Alba, who stayed silent. Undeterred, he pushed on.

“He was most impressed by your service. So much so, that he made an offer for your purchase!”

Alba's eyes flicked up at him.

"I know what you're thinking. I'm in no position to sell you, and we need you for the tour. Well, that's what I told him, but Nasica is fast as a whip, and he had the ideal solution. He's sending a letter to Primus today, making his offer for you. Primus will reply to him while we're on our journey, and if he says yes, I'll be able to hand you over to Nasica when we pass back through Verulamium! What do you say?"

He smiled. Alba didn't respond so he hunched down, trying to see her face.

"Well?" he asked.

"What would you like me to say, father?" Alba asked quietly.

"Well, isn't it good? Nasica is higher up the chain of command than Primus. And to be asked for personally, too. It's a big step up in your status."

Alba closed her eyes.

"You bastard," she said.

"I'm... said Trio. "I'm sorry, what?"

"How dare you!" Alba said, raising her chin.

She dropped off the side of the wagon and walked next to it, seething. Curio was startled. Even Octa raised his eyebrows. Pavo, who was sitting at the back of the wagon, looked around the side.

"Time for a whipping!" he called.

But Trio seemed more confused than anything else.

"I thought you'd be happy!" he said.

"I like being bought and sold, do I? You want to sell me, you want to take me away from everyone I know, dump me in Verulamium with some horny old bastard!"

"Language!" said Trio.

“Fuck!” shouted Alba. She marched off the side of the road to a tree stump and kicked it repeatedly, sending pieces of bark flying. “Fuck!”

Trio looked at Curio pleadingly.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into her,” he said. “Is she possessed?”

Alba got tired of kicking the stump, and sat down on it. She massaged her scalp with clawed fingers.

“I’ve never seen a slave act like this!” said Trio quietly, turning away so Alba wouldn’t hear and holding up his hand to the side of his mouth as a token sound shield. “I mean, I’d heard stories, but...”

“It’s because Musca spoiled her,” said Pavo, walking up behind them. “If you ask me, slaves are like drums. They’re useless if you don’t beat them.” Pavo rocked on his heels, proud of his new proverb. Curio rolled his eyes at him, and took Trio by the arm, gently leading him away from Pavo.

“Please don’t whip her,” he said to Trio.

“I can’t have an out-of-control slave,” Trio whittered.

“Please!” said Curio.

“Why not?” said Trio.

Curio thought fast. “Because she’s an actress. You can’t treat her like a normal slave. If you whip her, she’ll end up quiet and timid.”

“Sounds perfect,” said Pavo, following them.

“No!” said Curio. He turned back to Trio. “Please trust me on this. Acting is harder than it looks. You need to be able to trust the first thing that comes into your head. Slaves can’t do it normally, because it gets whipped out of them. Please, we need Alba as she is.”

He said it loud enough for Alba to hear. He hoped it was winning him a few points.

Trio's eyes darted over Curio's face as he absorbed the concept.

"But I can't let Primus or Nasica think I've been letting her go astray," said Trio.

"Uh, fellows?" said Pavo, looking down the road.

"Well, maybe give her some other punishment, then," said Curio.

"But will that work? I mean, if the punishment isn't changing her behaviour, then..."

"Hey! Both of you!" said Pavo.

Pavo's voice sounded different. It was missing its usual smugness. Curio looked around in alarm.

Pavo was pointing down the road. Three horsemen were approaching from behind them, wearing grey hooded capes and carrying crossbows.

"Bandits," said Curio.

"We're ready for them," said Trio. "Octa?"

They looked at the wagon. The driver's seat was empty, and the ox was walking forward aimlessly.

"Where is he?" asked Pavo.

On the far side of the road, Curio saw Octa was running off between the scrub and the stumps, towards the distant tree line. His head was down, and he wasn't looking back.

"Whoa, hey, what the hell?" called Curio. "Come back!"

Alba had disappeared too. The only sign of her was a patch of shaking bracken. Curio looked for somewhere to run, too, but it was too late: The bandits were on top of them.

“Hands!” called the leader, waving a crossbow.

Pavo put up his hands, and Trio and Curio followed his lead.

Two of the bandits aimed their crossbows at them, while the third dropped off his horse and went to the wagon. There was something slightly off about the bandits. They didn’t move with the smoothness of trained soldiers or mercenaries, and didn’t hold their bows with straight arms like experienced bowsmen.

The bandit on foot poked the leather covering aside with the tip of his bow and checked inside.

“All clear,” he said. “Just bags.” He pulled back the hood of his cape to reveal a face covered in spots. He was about sixteen, chinless, with curly red hair.

Curio glanced up at the other two on horseback.

The oldest of them was about seventeen, with a sneer and the downy first growth of beard. The other was younger, with puppy-fat and a pudding-bowl haircut.

This was bad, thought Curio. If they were young then they’d be jumpy. It was vital not to upset them, like Trio was about to do. Curio watched in horror as the priest approached the spotty one and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Excuse me,” he said.

Spotty spun around and waved his crossbow at Trio’s chest.

“The peace of the Lord be with you,” said Trio.

“Get back!” screamed Spotty. “Get back!”

Curio became very aware of the other two crossbows pointing at himself and Pavo.

“Trio...” he said.

Trio was walking slowly towards the bandit with his arms outstretched as if he was going to give him a hug.

“The Lord loves you. Yea, even the grievous sinners, upon repenting...”

“I told you to get the hell back!”

“But, don’t you see, by sinning like this, you’re really hurting yourself—”

There was a loud crack as Spotty head-butted Father Trio in the face. Trio fell backwards. Spotty blew air out of the corner of his mouth in relief, and kicked Trio a couple of times for good measure.

The two other bandits dropped down to the ground.

“You two going to try your luck?” said the older one.

“No, sir,” said Curio. Pavo remained sullenly silent.

The short one held the horses while the older one patted Curio and Pavo down. He tried the unconscious Trio next, pulling the money bag out of his collar.

“Look at this!” he called to the others, shaking the bag. “He’s loaded!”

The money. Curio’s heart sank.

Spotty one pulled all the bags and trunks out of the back of the wagon. His eyes widened when he opened Curio’s chest.

“Hey! Look!” he said, holding up one of the codpieces. It was one of the medium-sized ones, with a bright pink head and a slight bend in the middle. “It’s a box full of knobs!”

The older one went over to look. The two of them went through the entire box of codpieces together, laughing at each of them and holding up their favourites to show Shorty.

“What are you? Perverts?” Spotty asked.

“Yes,” said Curio. It wasn’t worth denying.

When the bandits got tired of the chest they had an argument about whether or not to take the wagon.

“Nan wants one, doesn’t she?” said Spotty.

“Forget it. We can’t escape with an ox wagon,” said Oldy. “It’s too slow.”

“We could put one of our horses on it,” said Shorty, thoughtfully picking his nose.

“That’ll take ages, thicko,” said Oldy.

“Why do we have to escape fast anyway?” said Spotty, holding up his crossbow.

“We won’t follow you,” said Curio quickly.

“Shut up, Perv!” said Oldy.

“This one talks like a priest,” said Shorty, tapping the moaning Trio with his foot.

“Nan won’t want us killing a priest.”

“They’re not priests!” said Oldy. “They’ve got a box of knobs!”

“So, what then?” said Spotty. “Do we leave the wagon?”

Oldy rubbed his stubble.

“Naaah,” he said. “I’ll tell you what we’re going to do.”

* * * * *

18: TROUSERLESS

Curio and Pavo carried Father Trio down the road, holding him up by his armpits.

After a quarter of a mile he began to regain his senses.

“It’s cold,” he said, touching his face. “It hurts.”

“Can you walk?” asked Curio.

“Think so.”

“Good.”

Curio and Pavo let him go, and he looked down. Something had changed.

“Where are my trousers?” he asked.

He turned around. Curio grabbed him by the arm and pulled him forward.

“Don’t look. Just keep walking.”

“But my boots! And my trousers!”

“We know,” said Pavo, keeping his eyes straight ahead. All three of them were naked from the waist down. Trio’s tunic was long enough to cover his modesty, but a cooling breeze told him that his loincloth had gone, too.

“What happened?” asked Trio.

The sound of distant laughter followed them.

“Run, Romans!” called Spotty.

“Should we run?” asked Curio.

“Don’t you dare,” said Pavo. “You let them take our trousers, but they won’t take our dign-”

An arrow whizzed over their heads.

“Sod it,” said Pavo, and ran.

Curio and Trio caught up with Pavo over the rise of the next hill. He was bent double and wheezing.

“Sorry, I missed that last bit,” said Curio. “What were you saying?”

“I... was... saying... fuck... off...” said Pavo.

Trio’s forehead was wrinkled in confusion.

“We were robbed?” he asked.

“No,” said Pavo. “We just... we just...”

He was too out of breath for sarcasm, so Curio said, “Yes, we were robbed.”

Pavo frowned at him.

“Why did they take our trousers?”

“Because Curio didn’t stop them,” said Pavo. “Because he’s a spineless coward with an incredibly tiny penis.”

“I didn’t see you doing anything to stop them either,” said Curio.

“I was bravely stoic.”

“So they took our money? And the wagon?” said Trio.

Curio nodded. Trio buried his face in his hands and began muttering a prayer to himself.

“Wasn’t this why we had a military escort?” said Pavo. “So we wouldn’t have our trousers stolen by infant bandits with crossbows?”

“You see?” see Curio. “And you were giving me a hard time for being a coward? At least I stayed. Unlike our brave warrior guard.”

“Octa!” Pavo spat. “What a streak of dysentery!”

“Did you see him acting like a hard man yesterday?” said Curio, enjoying having someone to blame. “Like he eats gravel for breakfast and washes it down with the tears of his enemies’ wives.”

Pavo nodded sagely. “Britain today is in a sad state of affairs, if the best mercenaries we can hire are men like Octa,” he said. “Saxons, eh? Bunch of cowards.”

A patch of bracken on the side of the road shook. Curio and Pavo abruptly shut up. Alba came out from behind the fronds.

Trio opened his eyes. “Slave!” he said. “Thank the Lord you’re all right.”

“Of course she is,” said Pavo. “She obviously trained at the same military academy as Octa.”

Alba looked down at their bare legs, and raised an eyebrow. She took off her headscarf and shook out her hair.

“What are you doing?” asked Trio.

She bit into the cloth at the edge to start a tear and ripped off a thick strip, which she handed to Trio.

“There,” she said.

He took the strip of cloth gratefully and turned away to wrap it around beneath his tunic.

Alba tore the rest into two pieces for Curio and Pavo.

“How come Curio gets a bigger piece?” said Pavo.

“You want me to show you?” asked Curio. “We’ll need a measuring stick.”

“Enough, you two,” said Trio, trying to look as authoritative as he could while adjusting a loincloth. “No more jokes.”

“So what’s the plan, Master?” said Pavo.

“Call me ‘Father’, please,” said Trio, once again dodging the irony. “We need to get on to the next village and find a priest. He’ll get us food and lodgings.”

“Really?” said Pavo. “Just like that?”

* * * * *

19: THE NEXT VILLAGE

Of course it wasn’t like that.

They came to the next village just before sunset, an unimpressive place huddled at the bottom of the hill where the road crossed over a stream. Its wall was heavily rotted, and sections of it had been torn down to make new gates facing towards the fields. From inside the village came the sounds of children, chickens and a millstone grinding wheat, and the familiar smell of pigsties and stew. Curio had grown up in a

close-knit village like this, and understood why the locals gave them wary looks as they walked into the village, bootless and trouserless. Strangers were tolerated, but not trusted.

They found the church in the centre of the village, and Trio knocked on the oak door. After a short while there was the sound of unlatching, and a small grilled window opened up at eye-height.

“Yes?” came a voice from inside.

Trio explained their situation.

“Charity?” said the voice. “Come back after the weekly service.”

“No, you don’t understand. We’re on a mission from General Primus, with the blessings of the church.”

“Show the official seal.”

“Um,” said Trio. “That’s the thing. Our documents were stolen.”

There was a sceptical silence on the other side of the door.

“Look,” said Trio. “I’m a priest. I report to Bishop Dedwin at Saint Peter’s in Londinium...”

“And who’s with you, there?”

“They’re actors. They’re accompanying me...”

The hatch closed, and there was the sound of the latch scraping home.

“Wait! No! Hey!” said Trio. He banged on the door. “Let me talk to your priest! I demand to see your priest!”

Some of the passing villagers stopped to watch. One woman was trying to lead a fascinated toddler away.

“Mam! Is that a beggar, Mam?”

“Don’t stare, Tiro.”

“Why’s he shouting Mam? Where’s his trow-sis?”

Curio touched Trio’s shoulder.

“What?” said Trio. “I’m trying to get this ignorant... man to let me see their priest!”

“I think that was the priest,” said Curio.

“No! A priest would be duty-bound to help a fellow cleric.”

“And are they duty-bound to help beggars pretending to be priests?”

“No, absolutely not, but... but a priest would know the difference.”

“How?”

Trio’s eyes darted around as he thought about it.

“Um?” he said.

* * * * *

20: THE HUT

There was only one man in the village who opened his house to travellers, and he wouldn’t take them. Curio stopped random people to ask if there was a barn to sleep in, but most of them avoided eye-contact and pushed past him. Finally, an old woodcutter gave them directions to a derelict guard-hut that the shepherds used when they were keeping an eye out for wolves. It was about a half a mile away from the village, over the fields.

“Why’s it abandoned?” asked Curio. “Did you kill all the wolves?”

The woodcutter chuckled to himself. “No, no, no. Hundreds of them out there. Close the door tight, yes?”

When they got there, there wasn't a door on the hut. There was barely a roof. The walls were a skeleton of branches woven together and pasted with a layer of crumbling mud. There was a bundle of straw on the ground, and when Pavo hit it with a stick, something hairy scuttled out of it. Curio couldn't find any good flints to start a fire, but that was all right, because shortly after sunset it started pouring again.

The wind and the rain were aching cold. They talked half-heartedly about guard duty, but no-one wanted to go outside and pretty soon Pavo, Curio and Trio ended up huddled together for warmth under a thin layer of straw, while Alba curled up in the corner, under the only scrap of sack-cloth in the hut.

The night went on for eternity. Every time Curio was almost asleep, a drip from the roof hit him on the side of his head. And his stomach was scrunching from hunger. And every noise outside sounded like the feet of hungry wolves.

Fortunately, the rain stopped at about midnight. That was when Trio started snoring.

* * * * *

21: DECISIONS

In the morning, Trio insisted on trying to talk to the town's priest one more time. After half an hour of fruitless knocking he gave up and joined the other three, who were leaning against the water trough outside the travel house, sharing a hard pear.

"We need money," said Trio, chewing his piece of the fruit, which crunched like dry gravel in his mouth. He pulled a face.

"Well, we can't beg any more," said Curio. "I got into enough trouble over this pear."

A small group of villagers were hanging around on the opposite side of the street, talking amongst themselves and shooting the occasional glance at the actors. But it wasn't exactly a lynch-mob, yet.

"We could always cut someone's purse," said Pavo.

Trio was shocked. "Never!"

"He's only joking," Curio lied. It probably wasn't wise to steal anything around here, anyway. It's not like the townspeople would have trouble finding suspects.

"I was thinking we could offer our services for honest work," Trio said.

Curio looked over at the young healthy townspeople. "They've got enough workers."

Pavo had a moment of inspiration. "We could rent Alba!"

Alba crossed her arms

"What?" said Trio. "Absolutely not!"

"By the hour. We could make a fortune."

"No," said Trio firmly.

"All right," said Pavo, looking up at the sky. "It's an option. That's all I'm saying."

Alba kicked a stone, but stayed tactfully silent. Curio noticed that she'd been keeping quiet since her outburst the previous day.

Trio pushed off the edge of the trough and paced in front of them.

"There has to be a way to make money in this town."

"I've given you two options already," said Pavo.

"We could always put on a play," said Curio.

Trio thought about it. "I suppose we could," he said. "If we educate these people, maybe they'll start to respect us."

Curio and Pavo breathed in at the same time, and looked at each other.

“Or we could put on a comedy,” said Curio.

“No,” said Trio.

“Why not?” said Curio. “It’s what we do best.”

“It’s immoral.”

Pavo leapt in.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “Our job is to spread the Lord’s word around Britain.

It would be immoral if we didn’t have the courage to put on one little comedy play to get the money we need to do our duty. It would be immoral not to use our God-given skills to solve our problem.”

Trio raised his eyebrows.

“Unless you’d prefer to rent out Alba?” said Pavo.

* * * * *

22: THE CROWD

Curio always enjoyed working the street and rounding up a crowd. It reminded him of his old days as a snare. He walked around the village until he found a couple of boys by the stream, skipping stones and pretending not to be watching some girls who were washing their clothes on the other bank. The boys didn’t look happy to be approached by the trouserless newcomer.

“Excuse me,” said Curio. “You don’t know where I can get a decent pair of trou... ou... ah... AH...”

He let off an explosive sneeze, and followed through with a forward flip, landing on his haunches. He blinked in false surprise. The flip played havoc with his ankles,

but the boys laughed. He got up, staggered forward and sneezed again, this time flipping over backwards into a handstand. He hadn't done this for a couple of years, and his arms buckled under his new weight. He fell face-first onto the ground and flailed widely. At least it had been a good-looking cock-up.

The boys were still laughing. Ignoring the pain, he leapt back up, lifted the hem of his tunic, and blew his nose. The sight of his tatty loincloth got a cheap laugh. He looked at the soiled hem, pulled a disgusted face, and wrung it out. Water splattered on the ground: he'd soaked it in the river before he started the gag. That won him a groan and a peel of laughter. He had them.

With the boys in tow he worked his way around the village, repeating variations on the sneezing buffoon trick. Soon he'd gathered a crowd. These weren't city folk, so they hadn't built up much of a tolerance for comedy. Pretty much anything he did, no matter how hoary, was met with delight. He started another old clowning trick, following random villagers and mimicking their behaviour without them noticing. It was a dangerous game to play back in the city, where choosing the wrong person was liable to get you stabbed, but it got big laughs in the village.

The trickiest part was always the moment when the person he was following realised what was happening. If they got angry, Curio would lose the audience. He found that the best way to deal with it was to bring it on himself, with a huge fake sneeze. The victim would turn around to look, and Curio would pretend to be caught, and freeze in wide-eyed terror. The audience loved it, because it took the edge off the fact that Curio was mocking someone. He would bolt, and after three steps trip in an acrobatic tumble that landed him on his buttocks, with legs spread in front of him and a dazed expression on his face. This was Curio's way of exposing his soft underbelly, and it made them love him again.

Curio had gathered about half the village together in this way when he hit his first major snag. The village priest came out to see what the noise was about. He was a short, stocky man, and he stood in the church doorway with his hands on his hips. The villagers who noticed him looking at them became self-conscious. The laughter faded, and some of them were slipping away discreetly.

If they wanted to put on a play, they'd need to impress the priest. Curio looked around for help. A few houses down, Pavo had gathered a small crowd of his own by doing some juggling tricks. Curio sneezed his way over to him. Luckily the priest followed, with the remaining crowd a few paces behind him.

As Curio approached, Pavo didn't break his concentration. He was juggling five stones in a complicated pattern, and seemed entranced by his own brilliance. Curio got within five feet of him, made a quick prayer to whichever angel looked after entertainers, and faked a massive sneeze that launched him sideways into Pavo.

They fell to the ground together in a bone-jarring impact. One of the juggling stones landed on Curio's forehead. There was a tittering laugh from the crowd. There was nothing from the priest, though.

"What in the name of—" said Pavo. Luckily, he saw the priest in time to shut up.

Curio put on his best scum-of-the-earth voice.

"Oooh, Master! Dreadful sorry, Master," said Curio, getting to his feet and bobbing his head with slavish humility. Pavo looked up at with confused disgust.

Come on, thought Curio. Spinning fist. Come on.

Pavo got up and brushed dust of his sleeves with exaggerated precision.

"I'll make you 'dreadful sorry', my boy," he said. He raised a hand and slowly cracked the knuckles, pulled his fist back, spun it around three times, and kicked Curio in the balls.

Curio was prepared for the misdirection. What he wasn't prepared for was that Pavo didn't fake the kick. He launched up into the air, landed in a foetal ball, rolled a few feet and came to a stop making an involuntary noise, like a donkey in distress.

"Let that be a lesson in manners," said Pavo.

The priest finally laughed. The rest of the villagers felt the tension disappear, and laughed and applauded along with him. Pavo soaked it up.

"Thank you, thank you!" he said, bowing. "With the leave of the masters of this village, we will be putting on a performance this afternoon! Tell everybody! Bring your friends, bring your family, bring your children, bring your wives, bring your slaves, bring your masters. Leave your cattle, unless they have a coin and like a show, under which circumstances bring them too! Keep food in our bellies and a smile on your faces!"

It was an old bit of patter that Musca used to use, but Curio was beyond caring about Pavo nicking it. He lay on the ground, unable to move from all his injuries. His arms and neck were on fire, the palms of his hands were bruised, his spine swore and his testicles clanged.

The crowd dispersed, leaving Pavo to butter up the priest.

"Forgive our humble troupe for intruding upon your flock like this."

"Marvellous, marvellous," Curio heard the holy man saying. "So entertaining."

"We cannot take the credit," Pavo oozed. "For that we can thank the church.

Have you met Father Trio?"

Curio lay still, and looked up at the sky for a while. He felt someone kick his foot.

"Get up," Alba said.

"It hurts," said Curio.

“Don’t be a baby. You’ve got to get ready.”

“For death?”

“That was the warm-up. You’ve got a play to do.”

Once Pavo had palmed Trio off on the village priest, they were free to privately work out the play’s structure. Curio, Pavo and Alba sat under a tree and worked out something that would fit their circumstances. They decided to go with an old favourite story about a wedding being ruined by a vainglorious soldier who tries to steal the girl away during the ceremony. It was a fairly typical anti-army piece, and Pavo was worried that the locals might side with the soldier. For people living in a tiny village with a rotten wooden wall, a soldier would have to be pretty bad to be considered worse than marauding bandits.

Alba had a brilliant suggestion.

“Make him Octa,” she said.

Curio tried it out.

“Gutt Mornink,” he said in a barely passable Saxon accent. “How are ve, my darlink lady?”

“Piss off,” said Alba in a noblewoman voice. She lifted up her hair into a pile on top of her head, making her look a little like Nasica’s wife.

“Zis must be ze famous Roman aloofness, yes?”

“No, this is me about to clout you in the pudgy face.”

“I have not heard zis vord ‘clout.’ Does it mean vat I zink it means?”

Curio puckered his lips expectantly. Alba raised a threatening fist.

“Aii!” Curio cried. “Iz zat ze zound of ze horn I hear on ze wind? I am needed in ze barracks! Farewell! Gott Bless!”

Curio saluted and fled to hide behind Pavo.

“What do you think?” he said. “Good enough for... what’s this village called?”

“A shithole?” Pavo suggested.

* * * * *

23: THE COMEDY

The audience didn’t constantly heckle, like they did in Londinium. It unnerved Curio at first, because he wasn’t used to the audience hearing what he was saying. He kept on repeating the same jokes again and again, but it didn’t seem to matter. The audience loved it anyway.

He was amazed to discover that if he repeated a phrase often enough, it didn’t even need to be a joke.

For example, early on in the play while he was playing Octa, he was surprised to get a small laugh from the line “I need a bale of hay for my horse!” He repeated the line a few scenes later, while his character was at a banquet. He ordered some wine “and a bale of hay for my horse,” and he got a laugh of recognition.

From that point on he had the easiest job in the world.

“Darlink, I need you... like I need a bale of hay for my horse!”

“You want me to go to Hell? Zat’s a long journey. I vill need some provisions. Like a bale of hay for my horse.”

The words were stupid, but magic. They got a laugh every time. It didn’t even have to make sense. “Who do you think you are, a bale of hay for my horse?” he said while fighting Pavo, and got a big laugh. After the eleventh or twelfth time he said it Pavo and Alba were grinding their teeth at him. But it was like having a new toy, and he couldn’t stop playing with it.

At the end of the play the Octa character was tricked out of marrying Alba, and sent off in disgrace to be a border-guard in Africa. Pavo tried to get the last laugh of the evening by pretending to read a letter from his slave: “The poor man is dead. His boat sank while crossing the ocean. It was carrying too much weight. Apparently, his horse was just too fat.”

Strangely, no one laughed.

* * * * *

24: PRIMUS, THE WALL AND THE WINE

Primus surveyed the repairs being done to Musca’s villa. The front was being replastered, and several internal walls had been removed to allow in more light and fresh air. Unfortunately, there was a worrying crack on the wall over the front entrance.

“The builder suggests putting in a column, and then rebuilding that section of the wall,” said Lupus.

“Can it wait?” said Primus.

The slave checked his tablet. “He says the sooner the better, master.”

Primus closed his eyes and rubbed them with his fingertips. He couldn’t pay for building maintenance. Musca’s death had been a windfall, but he’d already spent most of the money he’d made from it trying to save the situation in the north.

Other than the crack though, the villa was a lot tidier than the last time Primus had visited. There were fewer slaves, too. He’d ended up selling off too many, and had had to bring in slaves from his own house to do the maintenance work, which of course had annoyed his wife no end. She had moved out and was staying with her

mother, and he had been forced to attend social events alone, which was raising eyebrows.

He sighed.

“All right,” he said. Let’s get a man in to put in a column. We’ll have the wall seen to later.”

Some of Primus’s slaves came into the room, carrying a large amphora.

“What’s this?” asked Pavo.

“Musca’s wine stock from the cellar, Master,” said Lupus. “There are over sixty amphorae. I thought you might want to inspect one.”

The slaves put it down. Lupus cracked open the wax seal, and Primus sniffed. The wine was sweet and stingingly alcoholic. It was the smell of all the parties that Primus had been obliged to attend against his will.

“Master?” asked Lupus.

Primus took a step back. He could probably make some money from Musca’s wine. It had a reputation in Londinium. But so did Primus, and selling the wine would not do it good. Besides, the thought of one more rich buffoon getting drunk on his wine disgusted him.

“Break it.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Do it in the street, so people can watch. And break the others in the cellar.”

“Now, Master?”

“Now.”

“Shouldn’t we put aside a dozen or so? As a gift to the Church, Master.”

Primus felt a flash of annoyance, but Lupus was right. The Church would expect a few amphorae of Musca’s legendary wine.

“Of course. Twelve amphorae for Saint Peter’s. Which reminds me, any word from Father Trio’s expedition?”

“Yes, sir. You received a letter from *comes* Nasica expressing his delight in the slave-girl Alba. He’s happy to offer twenty *solidi* for her.”

The words came as a shock. He hadn’t realised how much he had been looking forward to Alba’s return, and felt his heart sinking. But Nasica had a direct connection to Emperor Constantine.

“I couldn’t possibly ask that much,” said Primus. “Send a reply asking for ten.”

“Yes Master.”

* * * * *

25: WAKING UP

Curio was woken by the cold and the pain. He half-opened his eyes and looked up at the sky shining through the branches overhead. His stomach sloshed, and his head felt like someone was tightening a belt around it.

“Shiiit,” he said, rolling onto his side. Twigs crunched under his body. So he was in the forest and freezing to death. Great. He curled up in a ball and wrapped his arms around his legs, but the cold had crept into his bones too deeply to let him sleep, and after a while he hauled himself into a more-or-less upright position and took stock of his surroundings.

He was in the middle of a spinning clearing. A large clay jug lay at Curio’s side. It was empty. He sniffed it, and had to use all his willpower to stop himself from vomiting his own liver out.

There was nothing to indicate how he had ended up here, or in which direction the village lay. But there was the distant sound of running water, so he got to his frozen feet and walked towards it. After his arms and legs were brutally scratched by the bushes, he stumbled out onto a path along the side of the river.

He knelt on the bank and scooped up mouthfuls of ice-cold water, which cleared his head enough for him to realise that his knees were now covered in mud. He looked up and down the river, but there was still no sign of the village. Trusting himself to the patron saint of hangovers, Curio turned right and headed upstream.

The river began to widen as he walked along the bank. Ducks paddled around each other making obscenely loud honks. The sun shone into his eyes, and somehow managing to be icy cold and painfully bright at the same time.

Around a curve, Curio found a gap in the reeds. The ground around the riverbank was trampled; it was clearly a drinking or washing spot.

Curio went to look. There were two tin pots half-hidden in the reeds just to the side of the bank. One was full of dirty cooking utensils, and the other was half-full of some kind of cold stew. Curio dunked his finger in and tasted it. Pork and leek. Under the pots was a pile of clothes: A dress, a scarf, and what were definitely undergarments. Curio was puzzling over them when he heard a rustling.

“Don’t turn around,” said someone behind him.

“Alba?”

“Yes.”

“Are these your clothes?”

“Yes.”

“Are you naked?”

“Yes.”

“And I shouldn’t turn around?”

“Yes.”

“Why not?” asked Curio.

“I’ve got a knife.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Curio became aware of a sharp prick between two of the vertebrae at the top of his spine.

“Please move out of the way.”

Curio kept his eyes to the front. Carefully, he took three steps to the left.

“Thank you,” said Alba. “Close your eyes.”

Curio obeyed. He could hear the rustling of fabric.

“That’s better,” she said.

Curio turned to see Alba straightening her dress. Her face was white from the cold, and her hair was stuck to the sides of her face. She was shivering.

“You don’t really have a knife, do you?”

Alba held up a large kitchen knife with a wicked-looking bend in the middle.

“Christ!” said Curio. “Do you know how much trouble you could get in threatening people with that?”

“How much trouble would I be in now if I didn’t?” she asked.

“I’m not dangerous,” said Curio.

“But you would have looked?”

“In a heartbeat,” said Curio.

Alba gave him a look and dropped it in the pot. She took it to the water’s edge and started washing the utensils.

Curio watched her back as she rinsed the knives first, and laid them out on the ground next to her.

“Stop thinking about me naked,” she said, without turning around.

“I was just wondering if I could have the leftovers,” Curio improvised.

“Help yourself.”

He sat down cross-legged on the ground, took the cooking pot in his lap, and scooped handfuls of cold stew up to his mouth.

“So what was that about, the other day, when you kicked that stump?” he said.

Alba didn’t answer, but kept scrubbing.

“You can talk to me,” he said. “I’m not going to tell anyone.”

“It’s better if I keep my mouth shut,” she said.

“I like it when you don’t.”

“You like it because I’m an actress. After this tour I’ll just be a slave.”

“If I had the money, I’d buy you, you know.” said Curio. “You’d have to be discounted, though. Maybe if you got really fat. Or if you damaged your good reputation...”

Alba got up and Curio held out the empty pot for her. As she took it, she patted him on the top of his head.

“That’s sweet,” she said. “But I’m still not fucking you.”

* * * * *

26: ON FOOT

They'd made enough from the performance to buy trousers and provisions, but nowhere near enough for transport. Later that day they started their journey on foot towards the town of Venonae, the halfway point to Hadrian's Wall.

As usual, Curio's hangover only kicked in properly at around noon. Trio was kind enough to stop each time he needed to make a run to the bushes.

"Must have been something I ate," Curio said, wiping his mouth.

"Really?" said Pavo. "Then it's lucky you washed it down with so much beer."

In the evening they stopped at another small village and put on their Octa play. It was easier to win over the villagers now that they were better dressed, and the play was easier to perform the second time around. Curio developed his characters, and added in a few new jokes. He worked out several new mime routines with Alba and Pavo to make up for their lack of props. The audience loved it. As they bowed at the end of the play to huge applause, Curio knew they were on to a winner.

After that evening, the journey settled into routine. They walked in the morning, acted in the afternoon, and Curio got drunk at night. With the money coming in they could afford proper lodgings and good beer. Curio's life started to get a lot better.

It wasn't perfect, though. After a few days of walking, Curio's feet began to get blisters - small ones on his toes where the points of his new shoes were too constricted, and big ones at the back where the leather rubbed up and down with every step. When Curio took off his shoes in the evening, Pavo was delighted to point out that there was no substitute for quality footwear.

"Soft as your tubby arse," he said, tapping his own boots. But after another few days he was wincing, too. He didn't acknowledge that anything was wrong, but he stopped taking off his boots to expose his feet in the evenings. After a few days they began emitting a nutty smell. Pavo kept up his charade.

“So comfortable you can sleep in them,” he said with a fixed grin.

* * * * *

27: CORIELTAUVI

After a week of walking they crossed the fuzzy border into the territory of the Corieltauvi tribe. Up until that point, the idea of British tribes had never mattered much to Curio. He'd grown up in the towns, where the big difference between people was whether they were Roman or British, and tribes never mattered unless they were picking a fight. He found it strange that there was such a real, noticeable difference between the Corieltauvians and the rest of the British. The most noticeable difference was that they spoke to each other constantly, about the weather, the crops, their families, local bargains, or whatever else seemed to come into their heads. But Curio got a sense that there were other more subtle distinctions. He noticed that the Corieltauvians had turns of phrase, physical gestures, and timed pauses that seemed significant, but were impenetrable to outsiders. He also picked up that whatever was being said was secondary to what was really going on, although what that was, he wasn't sure.

The cultural gap was most noticeable during the performances. The audiences responded well to the play, but in seemingly random places. They howled with laughter at jokes that would have been throwaway gags in Londinium, and sat in stone-faced silence at jokes that Curio thought were the polished golden tits. They weren't amused by Pavo's sarcastic wit, but when Curio came on stage pretending to be drunk, they fell off their stools laughing. They liked some of the word play, but not all of it. And they got very uncomfortable when it looked like the young male

character was going to disobey one of his father's commands. But they loved it when Curio ended the same scene with an inane joke about a cow that hadn't been milked for so long that it exploded.

Until he met the Corieltauvi, Curio had believed that comedy was universal, and people who didn't get his jokes just didn't have any sense of humour. He was beginning to realise that it was a bit more complicated, and where and how people grew up made a big difference to what they thought was funny.

Nevertheless, Curio enjoyed the plays. During the days, Alba was keeping herself quiet and restrained, but on stage her personality came back with a vengeance. She would fire off insults that had Curio blinking away tears of laughter, and follow them up with devastating speeches about her character's pain at being forced to marry against her will. When she talked about the torment of being treated as a plaything and kept apart from everything she loved, Curio got a sense that she wasn't talking in character.

The performances must have unnerved Trio, because he began to insist that Alba join him in regular prayer sessions. They would go off together and sit under a tree by the side of the road, and Trio would talk. Curio watched the two of them from afar, often with a mug of beer in his hand. He was keen to spend more time with Alba, but not keen enough for that.

He asked her about it afterwards.

"He was just going on about accepting the order of God and my place in the world," she said. "Most of the time it sounded like he was trying to get me to forgive him."

"And do you?"

"Mind your own business."

“Are you bored out of your mind?”

“Actually, I asked for the last two prayer sessions myself.”

“Why? What are you up to?”

“Your business. Mind it.”

“Be honest. As soon as we reach the wall you’re going to nick Trio’s money pouch and skip over into Hibernia.”

“You know what’s your own business? Not this.”

“All right. So you’re just enjoying his prayers, then? He’s an entertaining man? You’re hanging on every word?”

“Isn’t that enough?” she said. But she was suppressing a grin.

So Alba was plotting something involving Father Trio, which made Curio feel better. Still, as Pavo never got tired of telling him, he was a nosey bugger, and every time he was alone with Alba after that he did his best to grill her about her plans. She always answered with a variation of “Business. Yours. Minding. Do. Now. Go.”

More frustratingly, whenever Trio was around, Alba played the part of the humble slave girl, and played it very well. She kept her face straight and her eyes down. Curio didn’t want to interfere in whatever she was up to, but he couldn’t stand being ignored. He couldn’t help himself. Whenever Trio’s back was turned Curio would sidle up to Alba and whisper jokes and rude stories. She didn’t smile, although Curio could see her balling her hands up into fists.

It began to drive Curio a little crazy. Every night he lay awake trying to think of new ways to make Alba crack.

Something was agitating Trio, too. He wasn’t sleeping well, and would jolt awake at all hours and run his prayer-beads through his fingers, then fall back into a restless slumber. Whenever they put on the play in a village he would walk as far as

he could from the performance area, and only come back hours after it was safely over. As they approached Venonae he asked the actors to rehearse the morality play.

“It’s important that we get back to doing what we were meant to,” he said. “If we can do a good, proper play for the bishop of Venonae, maybe he’ll give us travel money, so we won’t have to put on that sinful comedy any longer.”

Curio’s heart sank, but seeing the priest’s fragile state, he agreed to perform the terrible play again. It seemed cruel not to.

* * * * *

28: VENONAE

Roman towns were like Roman cooking. They took local flavours and dulled them into something that could have come from anywhere. The people of Venonae were all Corieltauvian, just like the people in the surrounding territory, but the meandering conversations had disappeared in favour of quick deals and barked orders. Venonae was a town of commerce, and commerce turned people Roman.

Trio’s morality play wasn’t as painful to perform the second time around. The actors had a better idea of what they were getting themselves into, and few hours of actual rehearsal. But the real help came from the bishop of Venonae, who hadn’t gone out of his way to get them an audience. In the end, the only people watching them were the bishop, his entourage, and a couple of depressed-looking men from the servants’ quarters.

The play went as smoothly as it could. Pavo hammed it up, Alba brought some pathos, and even Curio found himself giving his all in a melodramatic scene where he

denounced all forms of lying. At the end of it, sweating profusely, they bowed to a smattering of applause.

Trio approached the bishop to explain the troupe's financial situation.

"You're a little hard up, are you?" said the bishop.

"Yes," said Trio. "And I thought, now you've seen the play, you might want to support..."

"Nononono," said the bishop, shaking his head. "I don't think so, lad."

"It's just that this is a church mission..."

"I know, I know, but my first and only responsibility lies in this town."

"But we were robbed!" said Trio.

"Well," said the bishop, "Perhaps that's the lord telling you something, eh?"

He slapped Trio on the back in a fatherly fashion and walked away, leaving Trio very much alone.

* * * * *

29: PRIMUS AND THE WINE

The wine was still there.

Primus sat at the dining table with his back to it. The twelve amphorae that he had tried to give to the church leant against the wall by the door. The church hadn't accepted them, which meant that Primus was out of political favour. He couldn't even make them take his wine.

There was only one lit torch in the atrium. The night air was cold, and Primus wasn't wearing a cape. He had been told that the cold made you stronger, which was why barbarians always came from the north and the weak intellectuals came from hot

climates – the cold made you strong and hardy, and the heat made you clever but feeble. Over the past few weeks he'd been as clever as he could. Now he needed strength.

That afternoon, he'd received a letter from the priest of a small village north of Verulamium, saying that Father Trio's troupe had been robbed outside Verulamium. They were unharmed but they had lost all their possessions, as well as Octa.

The news was keeping Primus awake, when all the slaves were asleep in their quarters. It kept him at the atrium table, watching the moths spiralling down from the open roof and sizzling on the torch one by one.

There was going to be a war. Emperor Constantine had taken nearly all the troops to Gaul, and Primus wasn't popular or rich enough to raise a militia, even if he had the authority to. There was only one way to raise an army now, a way he was ashamed of, and that he probably wouldn't have thought of if he hadn't been born a Roman. He rubbed his temples in slow circles. Briefly, he let himself imagine that his fingers were Alba's.

The wine was still there.

Primus shivered and glanced around at the amphorae. Above them, the crack was still growing, and the plaster around it was getting damp and beginning to crumble. The moving shadows from the torchlight made it seem like assassins were waiting at the corners of his vision. Not that there was any danger – the doors were thick and bolted. The only threat came from the slaves, but they all knew that Primus played by the old rules. If any of them tried to assassinate him, then every single one of them would be put to the death. It was the only way to be safe.

Primus watched another white moth flying out of the darkness, beginning its slow and inevitable spiral down towards the fire. At every Roman dinner party for the last

seven years, the conversation always turned to how the Brits couldn't be trusted to rule themselves, and many of Primus's Roman friends left for Rome or Carthage with as much gold as they could.

But Primus stayed. He stayed because he'd grown up in Rome, and seen the place falling to pieces without solid traditional values. The administrators were constantly squabbling over politics, and vital services like road maintenance or food delivery or justice were used as playing pieces for personal power. Even the emperor himself, the great Honorius, was widely reputed to be a jelly-brain obsessed with farming chickens. Whether this was an indictment of the emperor or an indication of how disrespectful the population had become didn't particularly matter to Primus. Either way, it wasn't a place where he felt he could live.

The British at least believed in authority. They believed in pulling together in a common cause. And their champion, Constantine III, was a military man, which Primus approved of. So Primus had sworn his loyalty and made himself of service to his new Emperor.

And the wine was still there.

Seven years. Seven years of being passed up for promotion. Seven years of being left off Constantine's guest list. He was secretary to the prefect, of course, which ought to have given him some prestige, but in truth it all boiled down to administration, filling in forms, chasing up payments, making sure the taxes and the wheat kept flowing to Constantine's armies in Gaul. There was a vast amount of responsibility, and very little recognition.

Meanwhile, men like Nasica were getting the real power, the real authority, and squandering it on fancy clothes and imported foods. They deserved what was coming to them.

He took out the letter that Lupus had intercepted from the treacherous landowners, and re-read it.

...Most Noble Honorius, True and Holy Emperor...

...Left undefended by the usurper Constantine...

...to take back your rightful territories of Britannia Prima, Britannia Secunda, Maxima Caesariensis, Flavia Caesariensis and Valentia...

...a single legion would be all we could ask...

...your loyal citizens...

The men who'd written it were all dead, but it could still be sent. He could still get an army. It meant betraying Britain, and betraying his emperor. It meant he was the traitor that the Britons like Nasica always thought he was. But it might be the only possible way.

And the wine...

He was going to break his oath to Constantine, which he had sworn in front of God. And he couldn't ask the church for guidance, because they wouldn't even take his wine.

So the wine was still there.

Primus rubbed his face and found that the tip of his nose was ice cold. He rubbed it between his fingertips and stood up. He ought to get warm. He ought to try to sleep, at least. It was going to be a busy morning. He had to track down an important grain shipment that for some reason was being redirected to Glevun, and there were complaints that someone at the docks had been stealing the armour destined for Gaul. He was about to go upstairs when the wine caught his eye again. It was no good leaving it there, against the wall. What would guests think? He had to move it.

He knew he could call the slaves, but a bit of exercise would warm him up, and it might even make it easier to sleep. He bent his knees, straightened his back, and lifted the first amphora. After a long while of body-shaking straining he let go of the handles and put his hand on the wall while he caught his breath. He tried again. After the third attempt, he put his back against the wall and slid down until his eyes were level with the top of the amphora.

He pushed his fingertips into his scalp. He couldn't even lift a bit of wine. He couldn't even do that.

* * * * *

30: LUPUS

Lupus padded down the stairs quietly, tying his belt rope with one hand. At the bottom, before turning the corner, he stopped and listened. The noise was coming from the atrium. He adjusted his grip on his club, and looked around the corner.

A man was sitting slumped in front of one of the amphorae. His robe was loosened and hanging around his waist, and he was slowly knocking his head against the open amphora.

Lupus approached the man, raising his club.

“That’s my master’s wine, you dog!”

Primus twisted around and looked up at him. His eyes were streaming, and didn't quite focus in the same direction.

“Master?” said Lupus, dropping the club. He knelt down and helped Primus put his robe back on properly.

“Lupus, faithful Lupus,” said Primus, and then frowned. “Did you raise your club to... me?”

“Apologies, master. I thought you were an intruder.”

“Don’t call me that,” said Primus. “Don’t you ever... bloody. Listen. I need you to do something. The letter on the table. I want you to copy it out, and sign my name to it. I want you to send it tonight.”

Lupus hesitated.

“Well go on!” said Primus.

“Master, shouldn’t you wait until...”

“No!” said Primus. “Now. I can’t do it. Not when I’m sober. Now.”

Lupus went to the table and picked up the letter.

“Don’t think... I’m not weak, Lupus.”

“I didn’t think you were, Master.”

“I just need a drink to... a drink for strength. Strength for this. Where did you go?”

“I’m right here, Master.”

“Good,” said Primus. “Good good good good.”

His head slumped.

“Master?” said Lupus.

“Shh,” he said, and rolled his head to the side and back, and spoke with slow deliberation. “When you’re done, send another letter, a different letter. Send it to Nasica, and tell him that... tell him sorry. Tell him that there could be a problem with selling him the slave girl.”

“Problem, master?”

“Yes. Tell him that she might not... might not be available.”

“Yes, Master.”

Primus blinked up at the sky, which was showing the first tint of dawn. He cleared his throat.

“But say I absolutely will sell her to him. If she lives.”

* * * * *

31: NORTH

The actors continued travelling north. On the second night they stopped at Ratae and Father Trio made another desperate attempt to put on his morality play, but from that point on it was a pleasant week of slow progress through the Corieltauian countryside performing comedy every night.

Despite this happy turn of events, Curio found himself distanced from his companions. After talking to the bishop, Trio barely spoke to the others, and whenever he did it was uneasily, like he was expecting them to attack. He spent a lot more time in the mornings at prayer, babbling incoherently under his breath with his eyes closed tight. A few times, Curio was sure he saw him crying.

Pavo was being irritating. One morning, as they were walking, he'd noticed Curio whispering another dirty joke to Alba.

“Pathetic,” he said as Curio caught up with them.

“What is?”

“You! Fawning all over a slave girl.”

Curio glanced over to Trio, who was preoccupied and muttering to himself. He leaned in closer to Pavo.

“I wasn't fawning.”

“Of course you were. You’ve been all over Alba since we left Verulamium.”

He hadn’t realised it had been so obvious.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

“Never meddle with other people’s slaves,” said Pavo condescendingly. “It’s just not worth it.”

Pavo bent down to pick up a branch lying in the road. It was the right length and thickness to be a walking stick. He twirled it between his fingers.

“I wasn’t meddling,” said Curio. “I was just trying to make her laugh.”

“Well, don’t. You’re meant to give orders, and she’s meant to obey. So keep it tucked away, you’re only giving her ideas above her station.”

After he knew he was being watched, Curio found himself making less of an effort to talk to Alba. He still sneaked glances at her, and spent hours watching the way her dress clung to her sides as she walked, revealing the shape of her body. It made him twitchy with frustration, but none of the villages they came through were large enough to offer a decent brothel or even an indecent one, and travelling with Trio made such matters awkward. He was forced to live with it.

It wasn’t long before they crossed another border, into Brigantes territory. The Corieltauvi were happy to share their opinion on the Brigantes.

“Fucking Irish,” said one tavern-keeper, summing it up.

According to the man, the Brigantes had originally come from Ireland. This had caused deep-seated grudges in the neighbouring tribes that had been simmering for centuries.

It was almost disappointing for Curio to enter the Brigantes territory and discover that they were just a tribe like the rest. The Brigantes accent had a distinctive lilt, but it wasn’t all that different from the Corieltauvi. When the actors entered a new village

they saw all the same kinds of people; the same swineherd boys, the same groups of women under a tree, and the same old men lined up on a bench outside one of the houses glaring at the newcomers.

When they performed their comedy in a Brigantes village that evening, Curio was interested to see that once again the audience had a completely different response to the play. This time they treated Pavo as the hero, and they laughed uproariously at his wit. They didn't so much enjoy Curio's slapstick Octa character, and when he started experimenting with a new character using his newly discovered Corieltauvi accent, there was a dangerous silence. The tension only broke when Pavo clipped Curio around the ear and called him an idiot.

It was the same all the way up Brigantes territory. The people didn't seem any more bitter than the Corieltauvi or the Catuvellauni, but they liked their comedy dark and sarcastic. They were quicker than the Corieltauvi to welcome newcomers, though, and their cooking was finer, which Curio thoroughly approved of.

The road kept going north, skirting the edge of the great marshes to the east. After the turn-off to Mancunium it began a slow curve towards the town of Eboracum. It felt good to be in a real town again, and Curio took the opportunity to disappear for a few hours and spend an evening in the seedier districts, drunk out of his skull and failing to negotiate any kind of transaction with a series of increasingly substandard prostitutes.

It was only when they reached the small town of Vinovia, sixty miles north of Eboracum, that the troupe hit their first real snag since the mugging. Wagonloads of people, trailing herds of goats and pigs on ropes behind them and carrying what were clearly their worldly possessions, were coming down the road the opposite way. The

procession was so large that they couldn't all fit on the road, and a large number of wagons were rolling on the bumpy ground on either side of it.

The troupe stood aside, and watched the migration go past. When it showed no signs of slowing down, Curio walked to one of the oncoming wagons to find out what the trouble was.

"Raiders," said the driver, a portly middle-aged man. Next to him on the wagon was a woman in a headscarf trying to keep control of a pair of young children who were repeatedly poking each other.

"What kind?" said Curio. "Irish?"

"Don't know," said the man. "Just trouble up north. We're not going to take any chances, know what I mean? Leave your brother alone, boy! I mean it."

Curio rejoined the others and told them the news.

"We should head on," said Trio.

"Into an Irish raid? Hell no!" said Pavo.

"But we have a duty," said Trio. He wrung his hands anxiously.

Curio looked at Trio with new eyes. It had never occurred to him that he might be completely insane.

"Forget it," said Pavo. "Not a chance."

"I'd rather not die of something self-inflicted," Curio nodded.

Alba kept quiet, but moved her body very slightly until she was subtly but unmistakably standing with Curio and Pavo, rather than Trio.

"Oh, come on. The raids might not be that bad," said Trio.

"Oh, just a light burning, raping, robbing and murdering then?" said Pavo.

"We don't really have to go Hadrian's Wall, do we?" said Curio. The others looked at him. "I mean, if we were just meant to do a tour of Britain, we could go

somewhere safe instead, like Verterae or Brocavium. They grow cabbages in Brocavium.”

“We have to follow orders,” said Trio.

“No. *You* have to follow orders,” said Pavo. “And Alba has to follow orders. If you’re going into a raid, then I’m going back to Londinium. Come on, Curio.”

Pavo started walking away, twirling his walking stick.

“No no no!” said Trio in a high-pitched voice. He reached into his collar and pulled out his new purse.

“I’m taking your money!” said Trio in the strangled tones of a man who never made a threat before. Pavo turned around.

“Give me that,” he said.

“No not until you do your duty!”

Pavo threw down his walking stick, grabbed Trio by the tunic and tried to snatch the purse.

“Get your hands off me!”

“Give me the money!”

“I’m a man of God! Help!”

Trio’s foot caught a stone and he stumbled backwards, taking Pavo down with him. They rolled on the ground, fighting over the money pouch. The passengers on the passing wagons looked down in interest.

“Curio! Alba!” said Trio. “Help me!”

Alba stepped forward, but Curio grabbed her arm. She shot him a blue-eyed glare.

“Alright! Alright! Alright!” said Trio, grasping the pouch under his chin with both hands. “We won’t go north!”

Pavo let go of him.

“Really?”

“Yes. We can take the back-roads to Pons Aelii, and then we’ll go straight home, I promise.”

Pavo went for the pouch again.

“No no no!” said Trio. “It’s a military base! It’s at the far end of the wall. It’ll be safe!”

“What’s so important about Pons Aelii?” asked Curio.

“I don’t know!” said Trio. “Primus just told us that we had to get there. The Count of the Saxon shore needs us, that’s all Primus said.”

Curio and Pavo looked at each other.

“What is this, some kind of political thing?” said Pavo. “What are you, a spy?”

“No!” said Trio. “I don’t know any more about this than you.”

“We never agreed to anything like this,” said Curio.

“We’re going to want a payment from Primus,” said Pavo. “Ten *solidi* each, danger pay.”

Curio raised his eyebrows. Ten *solidi* was a small fortune.

“Fine!” said Trio. “I’ll ask him when we get back.”

“No, you’ll tell him,” said Pavo.

“Fine! All right!”

Pavo looked uncertain, but he let go of Trio’s purse, and got up. Trio reached up a hand towards Curio, who felt obliged to help him to his feet.

“Bless you,” said Trio.

“All right, back-roads only, said Pavo, brushing mud off his elbows. “And if there’s any sign of trouble we’re heading back, all right?”

“I swear it,” said Trio, crossing himself on the forehead.

* * * * *

32: OFF THE ROAD

They took a wide dirt track that split off from the main road after Vinovia, and headed northeast. Travelling off the roads and far from anything Roman was a new experience for Curio, but not an unpleasant one. The track was wide, and on either side were low rolling hills. There was a jangling of bells from a distant herd of goats, but otherwise, all was silent. The only irritation was Pavo.

“So how far from the roads will we be going?” said the tall actor. “Ten miles? Twenty?”

“I don’t know,” said Curio.

Pavo pulled a face.

“You’re worried that there won’t be any Romans, aren’t you?” said Curio.

“I’m just worried that we’ll be going somewhere which hasn’t been blessed with the civilising influence.”

“And they’ll murder us and use our skin for boots.”

“Well, you hear stories.”

“They’re Britons, not barbarians,” said Curio. “These are my people.”

“Great. A region of overweight drunk slave-loving idiots.”

Pavo had a point, to an extent. In the first village that they came to no one spoke any Latin. Curio tried to explain to a group of young villagers that he wanted to buy food, and had to resort to an elaborate pantomime.

He played a hungry man approaching a baker, also played by himself, who was taking freshly baked bread out to the oven. The hungry man saw the bread, smelled the bread, and licked his lips. The baker sliced the bread and offered the hungry man a piece. The hungry man reached deep into his pocket, took out a coin, and held it up for the baker to see. The baker took the coin, dropped it into his own pocket, and handed over the slice of bread. The hungry man ate it, wiped his mouth and patted his stomach in satisfaction.

“Show off,” said Pavo.

Despite some odd looks from the villagers the mime paid off, and Curio was able to buy some bread and a fresh melon that he cut into slices and shared with the others as they walked.

The path out of the village was clearly being used to move livestock. It was trodden to mud and littered with dung, and it took a bit of careful footwork to walk along it without getting soiled. But after a few miles the path faded to a thin foot-track through the scrubland.

They reached a second village an hour before sunset. It didn't have any walls, just a guard tower. A horn sounded as the actors approached, and villagers leading horses to a paddock stopped to watch them silently.

“I'll ask for lodgings,” said Pavo. He grabbed a passing woman by the arm.

“Bed?” he said loudly.

Curio looked across to the men leading the horses, and they didn't look happy. He raised his palms at them, in what he hoped was the universal gesture for “we can't take him anywhere.”

The woman looked affronted, but pointed Pavo towards a nearby building.

“Thank you,” said Pavo. He let her go and turned to Curio. “There, mister mime man,” he said. “Was that hard?”

* * * * *

33: PERIGRINUS

Trio cautiously pushed the door open. The building was warm inside, and an old man with a halo of white hair was tending a briar in the centre of the room. He looked up as Trio came in.

“Oh, hello!” he said in Latin. “Visitors!”

Trio muttered a hello.

“You came on foot?” said the man, putting down the poker and smiling. “You must be exhausted! Let me get you something.”

He spoke with a swooping nobleman’s accent, which seemed quite out of place so far from Londinium. Trio and the actors stood awkwardly in the doorway as the old man rattled amongst the personal items piled up against the far stone wall. He finally stood up, holding a flask and four brass goblets.

“Well, come inside then, you ninnies,” he said. “This is Brigantia. We can’t stand on ceremony. Come in, come in.”

Curio, Pavo and Alba followed Trio inside. There was a large crucifix in one corner, but no visible altar. Two of the walls were lined with benches, and the others were piled with wood and sacks of grain.

The old man poured drinks for them, and handed around the goblets. Curio sniffed his. It was water.

“Um, thanks,” he said.

“I’m sorry it’s not wine,” said the old man, reading Curio’s mind. “Our grapes have had a bad season. But it’s fresh stream water, perfectly good.”

He offered a goblet to Alba, but she didn’t take it.

“What’s wrong?” said the man.

“She’s a slave,” said Trio.

“Really? I’m sure she’s still thirsty,” said the man, pushing the goblet into her hands. He handed the last two to Pavo and Trio.

“Um, thank you,” said Trio. “And you are?”

“Father Perigrinus,” said the old man. “The village priest. Sit! Take the weight off your feet.”

He waved them towards the wooden bench. The men shuffled over to sit. Alba stayed by the door.

“You’re sure you don’t want to sit?” said Perigrinus to her.

“I suppose... I don’t think she should,” said Trio. “I think it’s better to maintain the proper order.”

Alba shot Trio a glare, saw Curio watching, and lowered her eyes.

“Ah yes, the order,” said Perigrinus, nodding. “Well, we wouldn’t want to upset the order. Tell me, what brings you to my little village?”

Trio explained his experiment with the actors, glancing up every few moments to check Perigrinus’s reaction. The older priest bobbed his head gently after each of Trio’s sentences, but kept his face politely blank. Trio mentioned the mugging, but left out any mention of the comedies they’d been performing since then.

“I see,” said Father Perigrinus after Trio was done. “And you’re heading up to Pons Aelii?”

“We’re taking the back-roads,” said Trio.

“Even so, you’re a bit off course,” said Perigrinus. “There’s a better track to Aelii through Barita’s Wood, a mile or so north.”

“Thank you,” said Trio. “If you could point it out, we can be on our way tomorrow morning.”

Perigrinus raised his eyebrows. “No, no, no,” he said. “I can’t let you leave our village so soon.”

Pavo adjusted his grip on his walking stick. Curio glanced at him.

“I told you,” Pavo whispered. “They’re going to use our skin for boots.”

“Is something the matter?” said Trio.

“Nothing at all,” said Perigrinus. “I was just surprised that you’d be travelling on the Lord’s Day.”

Trio’s face went red.

“I can’t... how could I forget? I...”

Perigrinus laughed.

“It’s no matter,” he said. “I can see you’ve been losing track of the days. I only brought it up because I wondered if you’d like to give a service tomorrow.”

Trio’s expression underwent an extraordinary transition. He looked like a man stranded in the desert who’d accidentally stumbled into the Emperor’s secret, and unguarded, harem.

“I know it’s short notice,” said Perigrinus, “but-”

“Yes!” said Trio. “Yes, I’d love to!”

“Wonderful. I’m sure my congregation would enjoy some variety - I’m sorry, is your friend all right?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” said Curio, wiping his face. Remembering the service that Trio had given at Musca’s burial made Curio shoot water out of his nose.

* * * * *

34: EVENING

Apparently, as well as being a sort of warehouse for the town, Perigrinus's church also doubled as a meeting hall and travel lodge. Trio and the three actors shared a simple but pleasant supper of pottage with bread and strips of lamb shank with Perigrinus.

Something about Perigrinus was very familiar to Curio, although he couldn't place what it was. The old priest had some amusing but slightly rambling anecdotes about his early priesthood in Londinium and Gaul, and then asked them news from Londinium and their travels. When Trio told him about the raids and refugees in the north, he sucked at his teeth thoughtfully.

"Will this town be all right in a raid?" asked Curio.

"We've been fine so far," said Perigrinus. "We're off the roads far enough to have been skipped by most of the big ones. When we have to, we hide out in the forests. They mostly just steal some pots, and maybe our horses. It's always a pain, but we get through."

Alba sat on the steps outside throughout the meal. Curio's eyes darted to the door every so often as he wondered what she was up to. He wasn't the only one with Alba on his mind, though. More than once Perigrinus asked if she was all right, and whether or not they should be bringing her food. He only stopped asking when Trio's leg started jittering in agitation. At the end of the meal, Perigrinus brought her the leftovers and then enquired around the village to see if there was a spare bed in one of the women's huts. After he found her a place he excused himself, leaving Trio, Curio

and Pavo to settle in for the night. They were given the floor of the church building and a thick stack of woollen blankets. Curio laid out his own pile and stretched out like a cat. On the other side of the room, next to Perigrinus's pile of personal goods, Pavo snuggled under a blanket and took off his boots, hiding his feet from Curio.

"Are you feet still hurting?" asked Curio.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Pavo snottily.

Outside the window, Trio was pacing in the dark and practicing his sermon to himself. Curio could hear his feet crunching on the leaves, and caught the occasional phrase, such as: "the nature of sin" and "Inspiration from the holy spirit."

"Do you think we should remind him that the audience doesn't speak Latin?" said Curio.

"Who cares?" said Pavo.

* * * * *

35: SERMONS

The morning service was held at dawn, outside the church house. It was a pleasant change for Curio, who'd never been to an outdoor church service before. As they sat down on a semi-circle of logs arranged to face the wall of the church house, he was almost embarrassed that he felt a flutter of excitement at the thought that he'd soon be watching another of Trio's amazing sermons. He felt the way he used to feel when sneaking a beaker of wine into his cousin's church.

The men, women and children of the village arranged themselves around Perigrinus, who was standing in the centre of the semi-circle. Curio sat at the far edge,

next to Pavo, who was leaning against the church wall in a way that could hardly be considered reverential.

Perigrinus opened the service with a brief prayer in fluent Brigantian. The villagers closed their eyes and chanted along, and Curio did his best lip-sync. After the “Amen”, the old priest brought Trio forward and gave his audience a short, chatty introduction. Curio couldn’t understand the words but he recognised the trick Perigrinus was using, which back in the theatre was known as the “Wotcher.” It was a technique to draw the audience in by being relaxed and showing that you were one of them. It was risky because sometimes the thicker audience members would take you at face value and start heckling, so to pull it off properly you had to have confidence and some hidden authority. Perigrinus did well. He spoke conversationally but clearly, he used natural hand-movements, and he ended with a joke that got a bit more than just a polite laugh from the audience. Curio realised why Perigrinus had seemed so familiar. Even though it wasn’t his job description, Perigrinus was an actor.

Perigrinus held out his hands towards Trio, and took a step back to give the younger priest the floor.

Trio stood in front of them, and looked down at the ground just in front of their feet.

“Um,” he said.

Someone coughed.

“Sin!” he said.

He started to speak rapidly. It took Curio a while to realise that Trio was even talking Latin.

“Weareallsinnersitisimpossiblenottosin.Wearegiventhelordscommandmentsnotsothatwecansaveourselvesbutsothatwecanfail,provingthattheonlysalvationisthroughthelordamen.”

He took a deep breath and looked around. The congregation looked back politely. In the back row a baby started crying. The mother hurried it away.

Trio gulped air and stared into the middle distance. As a desperate reflex action, he started reciting the psalms.

They were in high Latin, so it was very doubtful that anyone understood what he was saying, but as soon as the congregation realised more or less what was going on they lowered their heads and closed their eyes. Curio watched him speak, stammering through the words without rhythm or any kind of connection to his audience. He was the opposite of an actor.

Curio took the opportunity to glance at Alba in the middle of the audience. Perigrinus had given her new clothes for the service; a fresh dress and a light green shawl. Her head was bowed, and her cheeks were red in the cold morning air. It looked like she'd had a chance to bathe, because her red hair hung down in clean ringlets out of the back of her head scarf. Curio watched the puffs of vapour in front of her face as she breathed; brief shapes like flames twisted away to nothing. He felt a kick on his lower back, and looked around. Pavo was leaning against the church wall with his arms folded, shaking his head slowly at him. Curio pulled a rude gesture at Pavo, and went back to watching Trio intoning his way through his incomprehensible psalms.

After the twenty-fifth psalm, Perigrinus came to stand next to Trio as a hint, but the younger priest didn't seem to notice. He kept on going for eleven more, faltering only slightly when Perigrinus put a gentle hand on his arm. He was about to start the

thirty-seventh when Perigrinus said “Amen” and thanked Trio in Latin, and again in Brigantian. There was a palpable sense of relief from the congregation. Trio was a little surprised to be cut short, but smiled proudly when Perigrinus thanked him, and sat down next to Curio.

“That went all right,” he whispered.

* * * * *

36: LUNCH

After the service Perigrinus invited them to lunch, which was apparently an established Sunday tradition in the village. Two long tables were laid out on the lawn in a field at the village’s edge, spread with apples, plums, cherries, pumpkin salad, wildfowl, salt fish, fresh bread and creamy cheese. Trio and the actors sat next to Perigrinus as the guests of honour, next to a weather-beaten farmer who was probably the big man in the village. Pavo spent the entire meal trying to get him to tell him where he could get a decent shave. He spoke louder and louder, but each time he asked, the man shrugged and good-naturedly ignored him.

Curio enjoyed the meal. It was nice to see the men and women mixed up together, and there was a lot of laughing and chatting and people putting on silly voices. He was slightly unnerved when he realised that there wasn’t any wine, though. He’d never been in a crowd of happy people before without a lot of alcohol being involved, and a lot of groping and fighting, too. Presumably, in a small village like this, the meal was more like a family gathering. He tried not to think about all the drinking, groping and fighting that happened at his own family gatherings.

Father Trio sat opposite, locked in conversation with Perigrinus.

“She’s more than welcome,” Perigrinus was saying.

“Thank you,” said Trio, “But I don’t think it would be right for her to join us. I wouldn’t want to be accused of being a...”

“A slave-lover?” said Perigrinus with surprising sharpness.

“What?” said Trio. Perigrinus held his stare. The mood at the table got awkward.

“I don’t, er, that is - what?” said Trio.

“Nothing wrong with keeping slaves in their place,” said Pavo with his mouth half-full. “Look at the all the aqueducts and churches and baths and everything. Do you have any idea how impossible it would be to build all that without slaves? No-one’s going to move that much rock unless the alternative is being beaten or starved to death.”

“What about roads?” Curio chipped in, just to annoy Pavo. “Soldiers make the roads, and they follow orders out of patriotic duty.”

“No, soldiers follow orders so they don’t get executed for insubordination. Basically slavery,” Pavo stretched his arms above his head. “Fact of life,” he said.

The meal went on into the afternoon. Piece by piece the leftovers were cleared away, and most of the villagers stayed at the table to continue their conversations. A couple of Tafl boards came out, and the games got underway. Trio watched them suspiciously.

“Games on the Lord’s Day?” he asked.

“Why not?” said Perigrinus. “We celebrate the Lord through each other’s company.”

Trio pursed his lips.

It seemed to be the ideal time to do a bit of showing off, so Curio attracted the attention of the villagers sitting opposite and did a couple of close-up magic tricks. He made an apple disappear, and pushed a small bowl through the solid oak table. Then he threw the bowl up into the air, and when it landed, it was the apple.

“I think that’s enough, don’t you?” said Trio nervously, but the excited onlookers called their friends over. A crowd gathered, and Curio did the tricks again, giving it the full, wide-eyed “where-did-the-apple-go?” performance.

“Wanker,” muttered Pavo, and sloped off to the church house.

As Curio ran out of tricks, the young men of the village started throwing around an old exercise ball. Curio watched the game from the sidelines until he recognised what they were playing. It was a simple exercise game where two opposing teams had to get the ball to the opposite side of the village. He jumped in, and was quickly out of breath. While some of the players lobbed the ball to each other over the buildings, Curio jogged along with the older men of the village who were following the game for a chat and a laugh. They taught him their names, which he immediately forgot, and a couple of local phrases including something he didn’t understand but which got big laughs whenever he said it, so it was presumably rude. He said it a lot. By the end of the game the old men were slapping him on the back and calling him “Koo-re-oo”. Some of them took him to the table and started to teach him Tafl. He won one round, although judging from the encouraging smiles they gave him, they’d almost certainly let him win. Then some of the young men took him off to the fields, and he helped them exercise the horses by racing them around the village. Then, just to make the day perfect, as the sun was setting, one of the women brought out a tray of fresh-baked honey cakes.

After eating his third one, Curio remembered Alba. He took one from the tray and went looking for her in the church house. It was empty, apart from Pavo's bedclothes scattered on the floor.

Curio asked around the village.

"Alba?" he said to a woman grinding flour outside her hut. He mimed a headscarf and a broom. The woman nodded and pointed him to a long hut across the way.

He knocked on the door, and Alba opened it a crack.

"I brought you a honey cake," said Curio.

"No thank you."

"Why not?" said Curio. "It's delicious."

"No, Curio. People will get the wrong idea."

"Which people?"

"You."

"It's just a cake," said Curio.

"I'll see you later," she said, and started closing the door.

"Wait!" said Curio, reaching out. It closed on his fingers.

"Ow!" he said.

Alba opened up again.

"I was just trying to be nice!" Curio said, shaking out his fingers.

"You're not meant to be," said Alba.

"I didn't tell anyone about the knife."

She leaned towards him.

"Why are you bringing that up?" she hissed.

"I'm just showing you can trust me."

"Are you blackmailing me?"

“No!” said Curio. He hadn’t even thought of that.

Alba eyed him doubtfully.

“Please, just take the cake,” said Curio, who was starting to feel foolish.

“No,” said Alba.

There was some movement in the hut behind her. She half-closed the door, blocking it with her body.

“I’m going to close this door. Are you going to shove your hand into it again?” asked Alba.

“Only if you don’t take the honey cake.”

She reluctantly took the cake, which had started to crumble.

“Is someone in there with you?” he asked.

“Thank you, Curio,” she said, and closed the door.

* * * * *

37: PERIGRINUS AND CURIO

Curio was hitting his forehead repeatedly against an oak tree in the centre of the village when Perigrinus found him. The old priest cleared his throat.

“Good evening!” said Curio with forced cheerfulness, his head still pressed against the tree. “You wouldn’t happen to have an axe? This is taking a while.”

Perigrinus tilted his head to one side. “Money or women?” he asked.

“Women,” said Curio.

Perigrinus looked thoughtful.

“You know,” he said, “I keep a little aqua vitae around for emergencies.”

Curio turned to look at Perigrinus, keeping his forehead on the tree and twisting his body sideways.

“Are we talking about aqua vitae the baptism water?” said Curio. “Or aqua vitae, the delicious beverage?”

Perigrinus smiled.

“Come and see,” he said.

They went to the church house, and Perigrinus rummaged through the supplies again and brought out a thin glass bottle. He pulled out the stopper with a satisfying “thunk” and poured a measure into two of the goblets. Curio and Perigrinus sat on wooden stools, and Perigrinus stoked the fire back to life.

“So,” said Perigrinus. “It’s the slave girl, isn’t it?”

“Am I really that obvious?” said Curio.

“Not at all,” said Perigrinus. “You told me it was a woman, and the local men haven’t strung you up by the testicles, so I assumed you were talking about one of your own.” He sipped his drink, and pulled back his lips, exposing his teeth.

“Whoo,” he said, and smiled through watering eyes.

“Are you certain you’re a priest?” said Curio.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Curio swigged his own. It had the kind of burn that slid past the defences and attacked the throat from the rear. He sucked air through his teeth.

“So,” he said. “What’s going on here?”

“What do you mean?” said Perigrinus.

“Giving me booze like this?” said Curio. “With no other drink in the village? This can’t be the normal way you do the confessionals around here. People would be sinning like crazy just to get a sip of this.”

Perigrinus chuckled. Curio kept looking at him, and the old man gave in, raising his hands palms up.

“Full disclosure?” he said.

“If you want,” said Curio.

“I wanted to find out what Trio’s really doing here,” said Perigrinus. “A priest with two, uh...”

“Vagrants?”

“Enforcers, I was going to say. I was wondering if you’d been sent by the Bishop of Londinium to check up on us.”

“Getting me liquored up to loosen my tongue? Have you even met me? My tongue’s so loose it’s around my ankles.”

Perigrinus smiled, but still looked uneasy.

“What are you worried about the bishop for?” said Curio. “You seem to be running a tight ship. The people all come to church, they’re all happy...”

“Ah, well, that’s the thing,” said Perigrinus.

“They’re not meant to be happy?”

Perigrinus shrugged.

“It’s not the main aim of the church,” he said. “But tell me about yourself. Can you tell me what you were doing to my oak tree?”

“Ah, well, I felt like an idiot, that’s all,” said Curio. He still did, although the aqua vitae was burning that away quite effectively.

“For lusting after a slave?”

“It’s not lust. Not just lust. I guess I just want her to...”

“Want you?” said Perigrinus.

“Take me seriously,” said Curio. “What does it say about me if I can’t even get a slave to respect me?”

Curio only said it because he liked the sound of the joke, but Perigrinus took the question seriously. He stoked the fire thoughtfully.

“You can’t value someone’s respect without respecting them,” he said. “It’s no bad thing.”

“You’re sounding a bit Greek there,” said Curio.

“You mean my accent? I studied in Athens.”

“I meant you’re being philosophical,” said Curio. “Reasoning’s a dead art back in Londinium. We win arguments by volume.”

Perigrinus poked the fire again. With the light shining up into his face, and the shadows accentuating his wrinkles, he looked older than he had before.

“Philosophising has cost me a lot,” said Perigrinus. “It’s why I’m in this village, not preaching in Londinium or even Constantinople, although I do like it here. Still, philosophising, and telling people what you think are wonderful ways to get into trouble.”

“Amen,” said Curio, clinking his goblet against Perigrinus’s. They drank, and Perigrinus poured a fresh round.

“So, what’s your story?” said Curio. “How did you end up in the arse end of nowhere?”

“I got in trouble,” said Perigrinus.

Something about the way he said it made Curio grin.

“Money or women?” he said.

“A slave girl,” said Perigrinus.

Curio coughed into his drink.

Perigrinus nodded. "I know," he said. "I fell in love. And it wasn't right, the way the world was treating her. So I started debating slavery with the bishops."

Curio winced.

"Ouch," he said.

"Ouch indeed," said Perigrinus. "And they put me somewhere I'd be hard to hear."

"So that's why you're looking after Alba," said Curio.

"That's right. Slavery's been on my mind."

So, Perigrinus was a slave-lover. Curio wondered if Perigrinus had been with Alba when he'd given her the cake.

"Anyway, it hardly matters now," said Perigrinus.

"So what's the problem with slavery?" said Curio. "Rich people have to feed their slaves. They don't have to feed the poor."

"It's not just about that. It's about the way we think about each other. I can't condone people treating other people like animals."

"But you're a priest. There's slavery in the bible," said Curio. He remembered the passages well. When he was a boy he'd been forced to write out large tracts from Exodus after his teacher caught him looking into the window of the women's baths.

"It even says you can beat a slave to death, as long as they don't die too quickly."

"Yes, well," said Perigrinus. "There's arguments against that. The Lord's coming changed many things."

"I thought that the scriptures couldn't ever be changed."

"No," said Perigrinus patiently. "But they have to be interpreted properly."

"By the bishops?"

“Yes. But you see, in this case, they were wrong. And it made me realise that just because that a bishop claims that he’s infallibly led by the Holy Spirit, it doesn’t make it true.”

There was the sound of indrawn breath from the doorway. Curio and Perigrinus turned to see Father Trio.

“Trio!” said Curio. “How long have you been there?”

The skin of Trio’s face was taut, as if someone was pulling back on his ears. He slowly raised a finger, pointed it at Perigrinus.

“Heresy!”

“Father,” said Perigrinus, getting up and raising a calming hand.

“Heresy!” Trio repeated. “Don’t deny it! I heard you! I heard every word!”

“The bishops are not infallible,” said Perigrinus mildly.

“Of course they are!” Trio sputtered. “The Spirit is with them!”

Curio surreptitiously downed the rest of his aqua vitae. He knew he might not get another chance.

“I’ve seen what you’ve been doing to this village!” said Trio. “You think I don’t see how you’re desecrating this church? And games on a Sunday? What else, Perigrinus? What other heresies are you spreading here?”

“It’s not heresy,” said Perigrinus. “It’s the truth. You must have seen the political games that the bishops are playing! Toying with the faith for political favour!”

“I’ve been robbed,” said Trio. “I’ve been mocked. I’ve been forced to live from the proceeds of sin. But I will not argue with a heretic! Curio!”

Curio hastily put down his goblet.

“We’re putting this village behind us,” said Trio.

“Now?”

“Now!”

“Please,” said Perigrinus. “You’re not understanding- ”

“I’m understanding perfectly! You’re a heretic, preaching to these people.

You’ve damned their souls, Perigrinus! You’ve damned their souls!”

Trio spun on his heel and strode off into the darkness.

Curio shrugged apologetically to Perigrinus.

“Curio! Now!” came the voice out of the darkness.

“Got to go,” said Curio, getting up.

“God be with you,” said Perigrinus, shaking his head slowly.

* * * * *

38: LATE NIGHT RIDE

Curio, Pavo, Trio and Alba rode four horses away from the village and galloped across the fields. The ground was barely visible. For all Curio could see, they might as well have been flying through the clear night sky. Fading into the night air behind them was the mournful wail of the horn from the village watchtower.

“This. Is. Brilliant!” he said, and whooped in the cold night air.

“Shutupshutupshutup,” Pavo said in the darkness next to him. It sounded like he was clinging onto his horse’s neck for dear life.

Alba’s horse was galloping along somewhere to the left, and Trio was far ahead. Part of Curio was sad that his time in the village had ended this way. He’d liked the place a great deal. On the other hand, galloping full speed into pitch-blackness was a definite rush.

He dug his heels into his horse’s sides, and galloped until he caught up with Trio.

“I can’t help noticing,” he said over the thumping of the hooves, “That we’ve stolen some horses!”

“It’s not stealing!” said Trio. “They were heretics! They would only have used them for sin!”

“Are you absolutely certain?” said Curio. “They seemed nice!”

“You can’t judge people by how they behave!” said Trio. “That’s the devil’s trickery!”

Curio nodded in the darkness. Trio’s mind had been crumbling for a while. Now it had finally snapped, it was almost a relief.

* * * * *

39: PRIMUS THE TRAITOR

The crack in the wall was leaking. There was a dark grey patch of mould winding its way to the floor. None of the slaves had bothered to scrape it off, or even mop up the puddle beneath.

Rain poured down into the open roof, splashing into the green slime in the fishpond in the atrium. Primus looked at it and flared his nostrils.

“How did it get like this?” he asked.

The old Greek slave wrung his hands in shame.

“I try. I am old man. Not good for bending, my knees they sore.”

Lupus, standing behind them, made a note of this on his tablet.

“What kind of household are you running here? Why aren’t the torches lit?”

“So sorry, master,” the old Greek grovelled. “So sorry. Your woman, she come, she grab the slaves two week now.”

“My wife?” said Primus. “She was here?”

Primus wasn't comfortable with the thought that his wife had been to Musca's villa. Recently, things between them had become strained. Even though Primus had fallen from social grace, his wife still had connections with the right people. She had been holding a series of lavish and popular parties. For that evening's party, she had lined up some impressive guests including many of the new nobility and some members of Constantine III's inner circle. But this kind of popularity came at a price, and that price, apparently, was Primus.

“I've told the guests that you have important military business,” she had told him that afternoon. It took a few moments for Primus to work out what she meant.

“I can't attend my own party?”

“I wouldn't recommend it,” she said. “You're not very popular.”

“But that's the point!” he said. “I have to impress the guests!”

“My dear,” she said. “It's just going to be a lot of unprincipled Brits. You'll have a terrible time. Let me do the talking. You'll impress them far more if you're not around.”

He hadn't wanted to attend the party in the first place. He couldn't stand the endless social niceties, the fidgety foods and the pointless games of one-upmanship. But it was a shock to be told that the party would be better without him. His wife had the power to make Primus feel completely insignificant.

So he had come back to Musca's villa, which was becoming his hideaway and sanctuary, where he could get some peace and quiet and maybe get through some of the administrative backlog. And now he was being told that she'd taken back all the slaves that he had brought here from his other house.

“Your wife, she come two week, she take all the slaves, she leave me,” said the old Greek.

Primus had a sinking feeling. That had been when Tiberia had been organising a boat cruise up the river for some visiting nobility. She had asked for a little extra money, and Primus had told her that things were tight and that if she needed money she could sell off the household items they weren't using. He made a quick mental calculation. Thirty or so slaves. No wonder she was able to afford so many parties.

He sat back down at his desk.

“Get me some food. And light the torches, would you?”

“Master.”

The old Greek bobbed his head and shuffled off into the shadows.

“These parties,” Primus said to the hovering Lupus. “What are they costing me?”

Lupus checked his tablet. “Thirty to fifty *solidi* each, Master.”

Primus squeezed his eyes closed. “And how much do I have left in the vault?”

“Twelve, Master,” said Lupus.

“Twelve?”

“Twelve.”

Primus ran his fingers along the desk's edge. He couldn't tell his wife to stop, because that would mean having to explain to her where all the rest of his money had gone, and considering the company she was keeping, it probably wasn't best to let her in on any state secrets. The parties had to continue. He would have to take out a loan. Heaven knew, he was going to need all the political connections he could get.

“Well,” he said. “It won't be long. When the messenger comes back from Ravenna, I will either be hailed as a hero or I'll be...”

He left the sentence hanging.

The old Greek came back into the Atrium carrying a plate. On it was something that looked like a pinkish strip of wood about six inches long. He put it down on the table.

“What’s this?” said Primus.

“Salt pork, Master,” said the old Greek. “So sorry. Is all I have in kitchen.”

“No other food?” said Primus. “Have the cooks gone, too?”

“Is right,” said the old Greek morosely.

“Fine,” said Primus. “Go across to Tribunus Crescens’s house. Tell him you sent me. Get me to send me whatever his family is having tonight.”

“Master,” said the old Greek, nodding. He limped his way across to the main doors and turned around.

“Where is?” he said.

Primus pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Go and light the torches, you useless old man,” he said.

“Master,” said the old Greek, and headed off towards the kitchens.

“Lupus, go get the food.”

“Yes Master.” Lupus made a note of it on his tablet, bowed to Primus, and headed towards the entrance.

“Lupus?”

“Yes Master?”

Lupus turned and waited expectantly.

“You would die with me if I get executed, wouldn’t you? You’re loyal to your master, aren’t you?”

“Aaaaaaaah,” said Lupus, concentrating hard on his tablet.

“Not that you’ll have a choice, of course,” said Primus. “None of us will have a choice.”

“No Master,” said Lupus. “Excuse me.”

He hurried away. Primus sat alone in the dimming light of the atrium.

“The die is cast now, anyway,” he said to himself.

From down the corridor came the sound of someone dropping a flint on the floor and swearing in Greek.

* * * * *

40: PONS AELII

There was something different about Pons Aelii. As they rode up to the gates of the town, Curio watched the people they passed and tried to put his finger on exactly what it was.

There were children herding goats at the roadside, and some men chopping down a tree. The smell of freshly tilled soil came from the fields outside the town walls. A small group of women was sitting under a tree sharing a basket of blackberries. Everyone watched them riding past with a great deal of suspicion. It was exactly like every small town throughout Britain.

In the end, the only differences Curio could pinpoint were that the hems of the women’s clothes were slightly longer, and the men all wore moustaches. Which meant they were entering an area with a whole new set of regional affectations, which meant another bloody unpredictable response from the audience.

“So who’s this count we’re meant to be meeting?” said Pavo.

“The Count of the Saxon Shore,” said Trio. “Primus said that he’d be hard to miss. He’s a big man with a red beard.”

The gates of the town were topped with spikes. There were quite a few severed heads on them, as a warning to the local troublemakers. As the actors tried to ride through they were stopped by a large soldier, who commanded them to get off their horses. He was at least a head taller than Pavo, with an oval shield and a very obvious sword. His armour was so polished that Curio could see the beads of sweat on Trio’s face in the reflection.

Trio stumbled through the explanation of what they were up to as well as he could.

“It’s an experiment, you see, a joint military and religious venture to, ah, find the value of theatre in... ah, moral instruction, and...”

The soldier looked blank.

“...So we were sent, but then we were ambushed, so we don’t have our papers, and we sent back a request for new ones, but General Primus didn’t receive...”

“Primus?” said the soldier.

“Yes,” said Trio.

“Yes!” said the soldier. “Primus. Good.” He pointed into the town, and gave them directions. Trio thanked him profusely.

“Did you understand that?” asked Curio, as they led the horses into Pons Aelii.

“Not a word,” said Trio.

“Well, we can find our own way around,” said Pavo. “It’s not like we need a map.”

He was right. The town was small, and surprisingly regular. Curio looked down one of the perfectly straight side streets, and spotted a training yard, where a group of young soldiers were running in a circuit and jumping over hurdles.

Pavo snorted.

“Would you look at that,” he said. “This place isn’t a town, it’s a bloody military camp. Nine years without proper Roman control and we’ve got women and children running around our military bases.”

A herd of goats crossed in front of them. Pavo shook his head, sadly.

“I like it,” said Curio defensively. “Soldiers living with their families. It’s more civilised.”

“Yeah? Well wait until the Picts invade because these fools are too busy making children.”

In the centre of the town was a tall pole, and mounted at the top was a draco, a dragon-headed wind-sock that was used as the local cohort’s standard. Under it was a water trough and a pile of hay for the horses.

As a child, Curio had always wanted to be a draco bearer in the army. He thought it looked both impressive and easy, until he’d realised that it meant that you’d be the only person on a battlefield who wasn’t holding a sword.

They tied up their horses, and Trio walked off purposefully into the camp-turned-town.

“Where are you off to?” said Pavo.

“I have to find the count, and the town priest, too,” said Trio over his shoulder. “I have to tell him about the heretics. He’ll send a message to the bishops about it.”

“What are we going to do?” called Curio.

I don’t know!” said Trio. “I’m not your keeper!”

He walked away.

“Well,” said Curio, looking around. “I could do with breakfast.”

“With no money?” said Pavo. “Eat all the hay you want. Be my guest.” He waved his hand at the bale.

“What do you think, then?” said Curio. “A quick performance?”

“Right now?”

“What’s the matter?” said Curio.

“Trio probably wants to do his religious play.”

“So? He’s not our keeper.”

Pavo rubbed his nose thoughtfully. Curio could see he was having trouble deciding who he wanted to ignore more, Curio or Trio. In the end, his stomach must have swayed him.

“Whatever you want,” he said.

“Alba?” said Curio.

She shrugged.

“All right,” said Curio. “Let’s start rounding them up.”

Down the street, Trio was crouching down in front of a group of small children, asking for directions. It warmed Curio’s heart to see that one of them was already sidling round in an attempt to nick the priest’s purse.

* * * * *

41: THE LAST PERFORMANCE

It was hard to perform the normal attention-getting routines in an area with a heavy military presence. Soldiers hated anything they didn't understand, because it was safer to treat anything out of the ordinary as against the law.

The best way to get an audience in the town was to go head-on. Curio and Pavo walked up to the recruits on the training ground and waited for their exercises to come to an end. As the young soldiers were leaving the grounds, Curio and Pavo blocked their path and launched straight into the patter.

“Bring family, bring friends, bring a coin or two if you can spare it. Within the hour, the esteemed Spurius Pellius Cavetius Pavo and myself shall be performing for you the tale of life, love, weddings and amorous excess! Amusement is guaranteed for all!”

He held up his arms triumphantly. The young soldiers looked at each other. Some of them knew enough Latin to attempt a translation, and the others huddled around to listen.

“Well, this is going to go brilliantly,” said Pavo. “They can't understand a damn thing.”

“We can still make it work,” said Curio.

They'd learned from experience how to make their plays enjoyable when people were screaming and throwing vegetables, which was pretty much standard behaviour in Londinium even when people weren't at a play. An audience that simply couldn't understand them was better than an audience that was actively trying to brain them with a cabbage.

Curio took the attitude of people trying to communicate across language barriers the world over. “We'll mime everything we can, and shout everything we can't,” he said.

There was a basic wooden stage at one end of the training yard. It wasn't very wide, and the boards weren't even, but it was a good enough space to perform. No one stopped Curio, Pavo and Alba when they climbed up onto it.

"Okay," said Pavo. "We're losing the scene with the Greek lesson. We'll fill the time with the slaves doing plate-juggling before the wedding."

"Plate juggling?" said Curio. "Lame."

"Any other brilliant ideas, Plautus the Fatter?"

"The goat-shagging scene we did for that play about the disgraced bishop," said Curio. "Put it at the beginning. Alba catches Octa with the goat. That's why he's so keen to get Alba, he wants to prove he's a man. But the goat keeps on popping up and embarrassing him. And at the end, he elopes with the goat!"

Curio giggled at his own brilliance.

"Can we do it in mime?" said Pavo.

"Easier than plate juggling. I can do it. You can take that scene off."

Pavo hesitated, but he couldn't turn down some time off-stage.

"Fine. Okay. We'll do it. And none of your speeches today, slave girl. In fact, cut them out forever. They're getting boring."

Alba clenched her jaw, but nodded. Curio was disappointed. He was looking forward to finding out what Alba's latest communication was going to be.

The play went strangely from the start.

They opened with a song to draw the milling crowds towards the stage. Curio sang the "Hymn to Britannia", belting out all the words he could remember and making up the rest, putting in a lot of stuff about the nobility of the British and the dire consequences for those who would oppress them. Some of the soldiers started moving towards the stage out of curiosity. When he got to the chorus he waved his

hands at them encouragingly, hoping that they'd join in with the "Britannia, Britannia" part, but they all stared back gormlessly. Curio had hoped for a bit more patriotism.

"British wanker," Pavo said out of the corner of his mouth, and gave the onlookers a sycophantic smile.

"Roman twat," Curio muttered back with a smile of his own.

More soldiers joined the crowd, and looked up expectantly. Curio raised his voice.

"Welcome, one and all!" he said, raising his arms dramatically. "Welcome, old and young! Let the play begin!"

The soldiers translated this for each other.

In the opening scene, Pavo played Alba's father who was getting ready to marry her off. It was pretty basic stuff and it shouldn't have needed many words. Alba played the part of the nervous bride-to-be perfectly, and Curio played the three unsuitable suitors; a glutton, an idiot and a miser. It should have been a sure-fire audience hook, because it was big physical comedy and it was a situation that every family in Roman Britain went through. Even so, the audience was talking amongst themselves more than they were paying attention. Some of the soldiers at the edges were wandering away. Out of the corner of his eye, Curio could see Pavo beginning to sweat.

They needed a big laugh. There was nothing for it. Curio cut the scene short, and jumped straight into Octa's goat-shagging scene.

He introduced himself as the goat by crawling across the stage on hands and knees, bleating. He went up to Alba and chewed at the hem of her gown, which got a murmur of laughter from the audience. She kicked him away, and he scampered

backwards and fell off the back of the stage. The platform was only waist-high, but it gave him enough cover to drop out of sight and come back again, in character as Octa searching for the goat.

“Goaaat!” he called. “Goat goat goat goat!”

He assumed the audience would at least understand the word “Goat”.

He hopped back onto the stage and walked around, bent double, as if searching for an ankle-high goat. He lifted the hem of Alba’s robe to search under it. She slapped the back of his head. The audience giggled. He apologised to Alba, and continued his search towards the back of the stage, where he dropped off again.

On his second circuit of the stage as a goat, he glanced into the crowd. A big man with a plaited blond beard and an air of authority was approaching from the back of the parade ground. Trio was scuttling sideways next to him, and trying to grab his attention. Even without the official uniform, Curio could spot a commanding officer.

He was the one to win over, Curio decided. He dropped off the stage and popped up again as Octa, looking down at the imaginary goat who’d just landed next to him.

“There you are, my beauty!” he said in the Octa accent. “No no no! You’re not going anywhere!”

He mimed grabbing the goat. Hidden from the waist down by the stage, he pretended to lower his trousers.

“I’ve got you now!” he said and started thrusting. That got a few laughs.

He glanced at the audience, wearing his best cross-eyed sex expression. He was pleased to see Trio had become distracted mid-sentence. The commander stood watching with his hands on his hips.

Pavo took his cue. “Come, my daughter!” he said. “Meet your new husband! The noble soldier Octa!”

He mimed pulling back a curtain, to reveal Curio thrusting away. Alba threw her hands to her mouth and gasped.

There was muttering from the crowd. A soldier standing behind Trio put a hand on his shoulder, holding him in place. Curio paused in mid stroke and looked up at Pavo and Alba, wide-eyed.

“What are you doing to that goat?” said Pavo.

“Nothing! It looked lonely!” quipped Curio. “I was giving it a hug!”

“You were violating a goat!”

“Never!” said Curio, climbing onto the stage. “A Saxon would never do such a thing!”

He pretended to notice that his trousers were still down, and mimed pulling them up.

“Violating a goat, in my own home! Get out! Get out, I say!”

Curio pulled himself up to his full height, a good head shorter than Pavo.

“You call me a goat violator? I ought to cut you where you stand! I may have violated a dog, a boar, and the knothole of an oak tree, but Octa the Great would never violate a goat! Never!”

Something was wrong. The audience was clustering around the translators, who were saying something in raised voices. Curio felt a wave of cold roll down his body. Someone shouted. The soldier who had been holding Trio was shaking his hand as if it had just been bitten, and Trio was free and running towards the stage.

“Stop!” Trio shouted. “Stop!”

Alba spoke quietly into Curio’s ear. “Start walking away now. Slowly. Now.”

He obeyed. The two of them left Pavo alone on the stage.

“Where are you going?” he said.

The audience was still talking amongst themselves. Some of them had begun to shout. As Curio walked away, he risked another glance. A few soldiers were chasing Trio, but most of them were running towards a long building at the edge of the training yard, which Curio realised was probably the armoury.

The commander had his sword raised, and was announcing something in a rumbling language that Curio suddenly realised couldn't possibly be British.

Curio and Alba broke into a run.

"...And that's our tale!" said Pavo from the stage, racing after them. The front rows surged forward.

Trio overtook them as they ran down the wide alley between camp buildings.

"What happened?" shouted Curio.

"You idiots!" screamed Trio. "You stupid bloody idiots!"

They raced back to the centre of the camp. The horses were still tied up, and they danced skittishly at the sight of the crowd of humans running towards them. Curio had the horrible sinking knowledge that they'd never get the ropes untied from the draco pole before the soldiers were on them. Fortunately, Trio ran straight into the pole and nosedived down to the ground. The pole snapped at the base, and the ropes slipped off. The horses bolted.

"Get them!" screamed Pavo. Curio ran after the panicking animals. After ten paces his lungs burned and sparks crept into the corners of his eyes, but he miraculously caught hold of one of the horse's ropes.

"I've got one!"

He pulled on it until the horse slowed down enough to let him haul himself on. Pavo had caught a horse, too. Alba ran up behind them, and Pavo reached down to help her up. Despite the situation, Curio still felt a stab of jealousy.

He felt a hand grabbing at his leg, and nearly kicked it away.

“Help!” said Trio.

Curio reached down and pulled him up. It felt like his arm was going to pop out of its socket, but Trio managed to scabble his way into the saddle behind him.

“Go!” screamed Trio. “Go go go!”

The horse didn’t need much encouragement. There were hundreds of angry soldiers behind them, and crossbow bolts whizzing through the air. Curio had to hold on for dear life.

The two unburdened horses raced ahead of them.

“What happened?” he called back to Trio. “Why are they so angry?”

“They’re Saxons, you fool! The whole village is Saxon! Every man, woman and child! They’ve taken over! They killed the priest, and the count!”

A piece clicked into place in Curio’s mind.

“Saxons? Like Octa?”

“He’s the chief’s brother! And you told them that he has had relations with a goat!”

“It was a joke!”

Trio didn’t answer. He just slumped against Curio.

“Hey!” called Curio. “Easy!”

As they rode through the town gate, Curio saw something that made him wince at his own stupidity. He really wished that he’d noticed it on the way in. One of the heads on the pole above it had a big red beard.

Trio began sliding off the horse. Curio leaned back, and did his best to hold the priest in place with one arm.

“What are you doing?” he said. “Stop it! This is no time to pass out!”

Trio kept sliding, and Curio couldn't hold him for long. He reached back on the other side and grabbed Trio's arm, pulling him back until he was slumped against Curio's back like a sack. As he reached back to make sure that Trio was in place, Curio's fingers touched something hard. An arrow had sprouted from Trio's back.

University of Cape Town

AN INTERLUDE IN RAVENNA

University of Cape Town

42: THE FALL OF ROME

Honorius, the true emperor of the Western Roman Empire and most powerful man west of Pannonia, was scattering breadcrumbs for his chickens. They rushed in and pecked the crumbs and each other. The only one left behind was the old cockerel, Durans, who stalked his way around looking for an opening into the huddle.

The slave behind Honorius continued reading out his report.

“Over a thousand pounds of gold taken from your properties, your Imperial Majesty.”

Durans' beak had become chipped over the last few weeks, so he couldn't assert his dominance. The hens hadn't pecked at his eyes yet, fortunately, but he was losing feathers around his shoulders, which wasn't a good sign. Honorius walked through the chickens, scattering them, and picked up the old rooster.

“The Basilica Aemilia and the area around the Porta Salaria have been burned to the ground.”

Durans tried to peck Honorius, but the broken beak tapped uselessly on his arm. He gently took hold of the cockerel's head and turned it to survey the damage. A semi-circular chunk was missing, including the beak tip. The cockerel looked up at Honorius with an eye as runny as an egg white. He was probably starving.

“Citizens are leaving the city en masse. They're fleeing to Carthage.”

Honorius felt something warm on his knee and looked down. Durans had defecated. Honorius sighed indulgently. He scooped a handful of crumbs from the bag on his belt, and held them up for Durans. The old cockerel pecked, but most of the crumbs fell out of the gaping hole. Honorius put Durans down and scattered the rest of the crumbs. The other chickens rushed in, pecking the old cockerel aside.

“The Church is in turmoil, too, your imperial majesty. The Pagans are using this invasion as proof that their Old Gods are angry at Rome for turning on them. And the fact that the Visigoths are Christian doesn’t help, your Imperial Majesty.”

Honorius considered the position. The chicken yard was wide. He could fence off a corner for Durans and fill it ankle-high with crumbs, enough to sustain him even through a broken beak. But it would mean locking him away in a cell. It was an ignoble way for an old master to end his days.

“Also, a thousand apologies for this news, your Imperial Majesty, but we have been unable to locate your sister Placidia. She’s almost certainly in the hands of the Visigoths.”

There had to be a way to restore the old boy to his former glory. Could the beak be repaired with clay? Probably not. It would almost certainly crack.

The slave seemed to be waiting for something.

“Is that all?” asked Honorius.

“Your majesty,” said the slave. “People are saying it’s the end of the Roman Empire.”

“What?” said Honorius. “Nonsense.”

“But Rome has fallen, Your Imperial Majesty.”

Honorius ought to have the slave killed for such an outburst, but he could see the man just needed some level-headed common sense. He tucked a hand into his toga authoritatively, and stared the man down.

“People will always point to every little thing as a sign that the Empire is collapsing. They always have, and they always will. This Empire will last until the end of time. Don’t let yourself forget it.”

“As you say, Your Imperial Majesty.”

“We just have to stop messing around. Get the army in order. Show these barbarians who’s in charge.”

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty. In fact, we might have an opportunity in that regard. A letter arrived from Londinium reporting that Constantine has left the island undefended. The sender begs us to provide a legion to take back the island.”

“Britain?” said Honorius. “Waste of time.”

“Your Imperial Majesty, don’t you see? Getting Britain back will show people that we’re maintain the Empire. And I believe they’re having a good harvest. They could supply our troops in the north with grain. We could take back Gaul, too. All we need is a single legion.”

“Britain is a ball-ache. They keep on rebelling. Pox little island.”

“Your Imperial Majesty, there’s thousands of your citizens there.”

“They’re not worth a legion. Then tell them to look after themselves for once.”

Steel would work. A court blacksmith could fashion a steel beak. He didn’t know if it would be possible to rivet it into place, but he’d leave that up to the blacksmith. Perhaps it could be cleverly hooked over the existing beak, or held in place by a thin leather strap going around the cockerel’s head.

“Imperial Majesty, if we tell them that, we’ll be effectively giving them their own sovereignty. It will legitimate usurpers like Constantine.”

“Good,” said Honorius. “Let him have Britain. We’ve got bigger things to deal with.”

He briefly imagined getting a steel beak made for himself. He would love to be able to peck at the eyes of all opportunists and barbarians and bureaucratic slaves. Everyone who opposed him, questioned him, or disturbed him, when all he really wanted was some time alone with his chickens.

PART 2:

FALL

University of Cape Town

43: SUFFERING

Trio was in Hell. Every time he breathed in he was speared in the back by an unseen attacker. More than once he held his breath until he passed out, and was woken immediately by the pain. He rode for an eternity on the back of a skeletal steed with its spine bones digging deeply into his buttocks, then found himself being dragged into a burning light. There were shouts around him in an incomprehensible tongue. His shirt was torn off and he was thrown face-down on a wooden table.

Someone said something comforting in his ear, but before he could understand the words his whole back exploded into pain. They were pulling something out of him. He struggled, but was held down by firm hands. He screamed. They were digging out his soul.

He was carried further down, and left in a dark chamber. He stayed as still as possible, hoping to be left alone, but he could feel the demons around him. They waited until he was nearly asleep, and then stung his face with an ice-cold cloth.

They tried to feed him, but he spat it out, knowing that it must be a trick. He had visions of furious men. At times he was somewhere safe, a dark room where Alba was holding his head to help him drink water or tending a bandage on his back, but those were just cruel dreams.

The pain in his back died down over time, but by then the rest of his body had started to burn. He saw visions of Curio laughing, and Pavo sneering, and less familiar faces from the journey. He felt wracked by guilt and started to cry, but he couldn't remember what he was guilty of. Pieces of hymns played on repeat in his ear, going on and on and giving him no comfort. Sometimes he was freezing and screaming out for a blanket, at other times he was hot, smothered and sweating. More

than once he felt a blooming heat across his trousers, and knew with terrible certainty that he'd wet himself.

He woke, desperately thirsty. The only thing he could see was a blue square hanging in the middle of the darkness. A window.

“Wa-” he said. “Wat-”

It's all right,” said a man's voice. “I'm here.”

A wild-haired silhouette appeared in front of the square, and Trio felt a water bowl at his lips. He reached for it.

“Gently,” said the voice.

Trio took the bowl, but could barely hold it. He was weak, and his hands shook. He drank until he was full, and handed back the bowl back to the darkness.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“Don't worry,” said the silhouette. “You're safe. Go to sleep. It's not long 'til morning.”

Trio closed his eyes and he drifted back to unconsciousness with a horrible suspicion growing in his mind.

* * * * *

44: DISGRACE

Curio and Pavo sat on the step outside the church house, sharing a bowl of barley. It wasn't particularly pleasant, but after the horses they'd stolen, they were lucky to be given anything at all.

“You're so proud of being British, but you can't tell the difference between a Brit and a Saxon,” said Pavo.

“Of course I can,” Curio lied. “But they had women and children. Mercenaries aren’t meant to have wives and kids. It threw me off. They must have had them brought over from Germania. I suppose they’re planning on settling here.”

“In Brigantium?” said Pavo. He shook his head. “Stupid bastards.”

Perigrinus came out of the church door behind them, carrying a full-looking bowl. “Look out,” said Perigrinus. “Trio still isn’t well enough to get to the dunny.”

They leaned back. Perigrinus stepped between them, and carried the bowl carefully towards the latrines. Curio hopped up and followed after him.

“So he’ll be all right?” he asked.

“It looks like it,” said Perigrinus. “His fever is down and he’s starting to make more sense. We might have to do another blood-letting. But he’ll recover. He’s blessed.”

“Blessed?” said Curio, thinking about their journey so far. Perigrinus smiled.

“That arrow was less than an inch from his lung. Our friend is protected.”

Curio was suspicious of any kind of protection that let the arrow go so far into you that it pierced the skin on the other side. But Perigrinus had been very accommodating, and Curio wasn’t going to argue.

Some of the old men that Curio had played the ball game with were sitting in a row under the thatch of one of the houses, staying out of the light drizzle. Curio waved. They ignored him.

“Do you think they’ll forgive us for stealing the horses?” said Curio.

“Give them time,” said Perigrinus. “They weren’t happy that you only brought back two of them, and one had an arrow in its flank. Still, the fact that you brought them back at all is a miracle.”

“Pavo thinks we’re idiots to come back here. You saw him hiding in the bushes when I brought the horses in?”

“So why did you come back?” said Perigrinus.

“It was the right thing to do,” said Curio. Which he admitted to himself, wasn’t exactly true. Partly, it was because they needed to tend to Trio. Mostly, though, it was because Curio couldn’t stand the idea of a whole village hating him.

“They’ll forgive you,” said Perigrinus. “Give it another week.”

Someone was shouting. Perigrinus and Curio turned to look. A boy in a tattered brown tunic ran into the village, shouting “*Sasson! Sasson!*”

The men under the thatch stood up and hurried over to the boy, who told them something that required a lot of pointing and arm-waving.

“Excuse me,” said Perigrinus, and put down the bedpan. He went over to the boy, leaving Curio alone with a bowl of shit.

The men listened to the boy’s story, and there was some more shouting. When it was over one of the men started striding towards Curio, and another grabbed his arm. Perigrinus raised his hands and said something. The men looked unhappy, but whatever Perigrinus had said must have worked because they went back to the cover of the thatch, shooting bitter glances at Curio.

Perigrinus came back to Curio, wiping his hands together anxiously.

“Well,” he said. “It looks like your Saxons are marching south.”

“What? The whole camp is coming after... after us?”

“Not just your camp. All the Saxon mercenaries along the wall. They’re gathering into an army.”

“All of them? But who’s defending against the Picts?”

Perigrinus looked confused. “The Picts?” he said.

“The Picts are invading, aren’t they?” said Curio. “We saw the refugees. Outside Vinovia.”

“I don’t think those refugees were running from the Picts,” said Perigrinus. “I think they were already running from the Saxons.”

Curio was relieved.

“So we didn’t cause this?” he said.

“Probably not,” said Perigrinus.

Curio bit the side of his lip. Whether or not it was their fault, everyone in the village knew that the actors had had trouble with the Saxons. Even the faint suspicion that they had caused an invasion would turn the villagers against them once and for all.

* * * * *

45: RECOVERY

That afternoon, Trio insisted on going for a walk. Alba and Curio held his arms as he tottered slowly through the village. Curio did his best to make conversation.

“So, what do you think happened back there, with the Saxons?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” said Trio.

“All right,” said Curio. He looked across to Alba for help, but she was being as silent as usual.

“Only, I thought it might be something to do with that chest you had. What do you think?”

“It’s not for us to guess,” said Trio, a little snippily. Curio dropped the subject. Something was obviously bothering Trio, but if he didn’t want to tell anyone, that was his own business.

They passed groups of villagers along the path. Everyone watched them with the same resentment shown to the actors by the rest of Britain.

Trio picked up on their indignant stares. “Let’s try the fields,” he said. Curio and Alba held on to him carefully as he limped off the path.

As they walked, Curio glanced across to Alba, who was holding Trio up gently but firmly. Since they’d returned to the village she’d barely left Trio’s side, bringing him water and changing his bandages. She seemed determined to keep him alive; at least, a lot more than Curio and Pavo were. Not for the first time, Curio wondered what exactly she was planning.

They walked between the houses to the field where they’d shared lunch with the village. Three remaining horses were cropping the grass in the middle. There was a new horse, too, tied to a fence post closer to the huts. It was large, black, and shaggy-haired.

“All right,” said Trio out of the corner of his mouth. “We can do this.”

It took a while for Curio to wrap his mind around what Trio was suggesting.

“Sorry, what?” said Curio. “You want to steal the horses? Again?”

Trio looked him in the eyes.

“Curio,” he said. “Every moment we spend here is a threat to our souls.”

“Perigrinus saved your life!” said Curio. “And these people didn’t kill us for stealing their horses! They’re probably the nicest people in the Empire.”

“Nice doesn’t matter. They’re heretics. They tricked you back here. Don’t worry, Curio. I will get you out.”

Behind Trio's back, Alba was grinning.

"I really don't think they're bad," said Curio.

"Yes, because you're poisoned by their lies," said Trio, and looked around. "We have to get Pavo."

He started to hobble back towards the village. Curio and Alba caught up with him, and took his arms.

A couple of village boys were sitting on a low wall by the closest hut, keeping an eye on the horses. Curio waved at them. They didn't wave back.

* * * * *

46: OCTA

As they half-carried Trio along the path back to the church house, Curio and Alba met each other's eyes. Alba shook her head slightly, and Curio nodded in agreement. They weren't going anywhere. But at least they were carrying Trio in the right direction, and he was getting heavier and heavier in their arms. Curio hoped that they could put him back into bed without an argument.

They were almost at the church house when Alba stopped dead.

"What?" said Curio, and followed her gaze.

A man in a black cloak was at the doorway of one of the huts, buying some vegetables from a stocky-looking woman. He was a traveller, and probably the owner of the black horse they'd seen in the field, which made him unusually colour coordinated. Curio was about to say this when the man glanced down to check the moneybag on his belt, and Curio got a glimpse of his face.

"That bastard!" said Curio.

“Wha-?” said Trio, looking around woozily.

“It’s Octa! Look!”

The hood was partially covering his face, but it was definitely him. Curio called out.

“Hey! Oi! Hey!”

Octa spotted them. For a moment he looked like he was trying to work out who they were.

“Get him!” shouted Trio. “Get hi-” the command faded into a wheezing cough.

Octa made a terrible miscalculation. He should have ignored them. He towered over them all, and could have crushed Curio’s Adam’s apple using only his eyelids. He could have run, too, and he would have escaped. Either way, the villagers were hardly likely to help the actors take him down. But he didn’t know this, and he foolishly grabbed a handful of beets from the stocky woman before he ran.

She screamed in Brigantian. Octa ran down the village path, away from Curio, Trio and Alba. Some of the villagers started emerging out of the huts. A few of them started chasing Octa, and others immediately assumed that the actors were responsible for the screaming, and rushed at them until the bulky woman pointed them in the right direction.

“Get him!” said Trio. Curio let go of Trio’s arm and chased Octa, safe in the knowledge that he could run as fast as he liked without being in danger of catching the huge man.

Pavo stuck his head out of the church house door.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s Octa!” Curio shouted as he ran past.

Pavo nodded, and went back inside.

Octa reached the end of the row of huts, and took a right turn. It was a classic mistake, and Curio could see that the big man had never had to run from an angry mob before. Any turn would give his pursuers a chance to cut him off.

Curio followed Octa as he turned into the clearing between forest and the village. For a big man Octa was surprisingly nimble, easily hurdling rocks and tree stumps. He was heading back towards the field, trying to get to his horse. The villagers that had been at the back of the mob were coming out from between the huts to cut Octa off. Octa had an ingenious solution to this problem, which was to unsheathe his sword. The villagers trying to block his path suddenly found themselves opening up like the red sea. Some of them fell backwards to get out of the way in time, but most just slowed down considerably, wondering for the first time why they were chasing a huge and dangerous man.

Octa ran out into the field, and a few villagers with their own weapons chased after him. Octa reached his horse, and turned to confront them.

They all slowed down. Octa threw the beets down on the ground, and growled something in Saxon. The front row of the mob approached cautiously. Octa began to swing the sword in a slow figure of eight. The tip of the blade went faster and faster, and in a swift stroke Octa brought it down on the rope tying his horse to the post. With the other hand he quickly grabbed the reins, to stop the horse bolting. The villagers stopped moving forward. Octa glared at them threateningly, and hauled himself up.

Still, no one approached. Curio watched from the back of the mob. It was pretty clear that Octa was going to get away. He must have known this because he growled something again, and spat on the ground next to the beets.

“Coward!” shouted someone from behind Curio. “You craven coward!”

A rock flew past Curio's ear, and glanced off the side of Octa's head. Octa's mouth fell open, as if he was about to shout something but couldn't find the words. His sword dropped out of his hand, and as he slid sideways off his horse. As he hit the ground, the villagers closed in.

Curio looked back. Trio was shaking with fury. Alba was struggling to hold him up.

"Calm down," she said. "It's all right. It's fine."

"There has to be justice," said Trio. "There has to be!"

The excitement must have taken it out of Trio, because he had another coughing fit. Curio took his other arm.

"Let's get you back," said Alba. Trio nodded weakly.

Octa was held down on the ground by six of the village men, and another one gathered the remains of the rope from the fence post to tie him up. Curio was surprised by how merciful the villagers were. The only exception was the woman from whom Octa had stolen the beets. She was taking the opportunity to get her boot in.

* * * * *

47: CAPTIVE

Octa ended up hogtied on the floor of the church house. He remained grimly silent throughout their questioning, staring into the middle distance. Perigrinus asked direct questions, which Octa ignored. Curio tried the friendly approach, offering a sip of aqua vitae, but Octa ignored him too, so he shrugged and drank it himself. Pavo mentioned that he'd once talked with the men who worked in the prison in Londinium

and they'd told him about their skills in great detail, but Perigrinus refused to let Octa come to any more harm, or lend Pavo his pliers.

Throughout it all Trio lay on his bed and kept quiet, the way he did whenever Perigrinus was in the room. The only sound he made to huff out of his nose as Alba changed the poultice on his back.

"All done," she said quietly, wrapping up the used bandages and taking them outside. Trio rolled onto his side, facing away from the others.

"Just a toenail," said Pavo. "It'll grow back eventually."

"No!" said Perigrinus. "This is a church-house."

"We could do it outside. There's no reason to do it indoors. Although there's a fireplace in here." Pavo wistfully poked at the embers with a charred stick.

"Please," said Perigrinus in the slightly exasperated tone that everyone used with Pavo, eventually. "Stop suggesting torture. This village is a place of God."

"Ha," said Trio, still facing away.

Perigrinus breathed in, looked up at the roof, and tilted his head.

"You have something to say, Father Trio?" he said.

Trio muttered something.

"Pardon?" said Perigrinus.

"I said, you dare to call this a place of God," said Trio.

"We live by Christ's laws. We take care of each other. I would call this village holy, yes," said Perigrinus.

Trio rolled over to face him, so he could glare.

"You've spread your heresy here. These people are infected with lies. Their souls have been corrupted. This village is separated from God."

Perigrinus licked his lips thoughtfully.

“Father Trio, there’s something I tried to tell you last time we argued, but you didn’t let me finish. I think it’s very important that you hear it.”

“I’m not interested in your heresy.”

“Then I’ll state only the facts,” Perigrinus said. He sat down at Trio’s bedside. Trio rolled away from him.

“When I was banished here,” said Perigrinus, “I assumed that this was one of the hard borders of Christendom, and I’m sure the men who sent me here thought that, too. I was surprised to find that I was completely wrong. This village has been an enclave of Christianity since the time before the first Constantine.”

Perigrinus arched his hands under his chin. Trio stayed silent.

“They were freed Christian slaves, you see. This village was one of the only places they could celebrate their faith. Christians everywhere else were oppressed and murdered. When Constantine the First stopped the persecution, I’m told that the village celebrated for a whole week.

“Then, twenty years after that, the first bishop came through the village. He came in a litter lifted by three slaves. The forth had collapsed, and was being hauled along on a chain behind the bishop’s bodyguards. The bishop demanded tithes, and asked the people arcane questions about the specific relationship between the Lord Jesus and the Lord our Father. When they didn’t know the expected answer, he became furious and called them heathens. He had a golden crucifix and rings on all his fingers, spoke in aristocratic Latin, and worst of all, was wearing the robes of the pagan Roman priests who had persecuted them. He took as much money and goods from them as his men could carry, assuring the villagers that it would all go towards purifying the faith. After that, the village had a meeting, where they quietly decided to

continue practicing their faith in their own way, and protecting it from the outside world, the way they used to.”

Perigrinus got up, and stretched his arms.

“I’m sure that some would call these people heretics, and try to root their dissent. But I have faith in you, Trio. You’re smarter than that.”

Trio lay still, facing away, with his arm over his head. Perigrinus watched him for a while, but there was no response.

“I don’t have the power to stop you,” he said, “But I ask that you don’t hurt your prisoner.”

He got up, and walked out into the low evening light.

“Thought he’d never shut his mouth,” muttered Pavo when Perigrinus was safely gone.

“Are you all right there, Trio?” said Curio. Trio’s arm still covered his face, but his body was shaking. Pavo rolled his eyes.

“Are you crying?” Asked Curio.

“No,” mumbled Trio.

Curio decided to let him be, and focussed instead on the difficult task of taking Octa outside to relieve himself. They loosened his bonds enough for him to hop to the door, and untied his trousers for him. They then had an argument about which one of them was going to help him aim his pizzle.

When they took him back inside, Trio made sure Octa was bound securely, but not so tightly that he lost blood to his hands or feet. He then went back to bed, and closed his eyes peacefully. Perigrinus’s words seemed to have moved him profoundly.

But not so profoundly that he wouldn’t try to steal the horses again.

* * * * *

48: INVASION

To be fair, they wouldn't have stolen the horses if it wasn't for the invasion.

They were woken in the third hour of the night by a horn from the village guard tower. Curio lit a torch from the fire's embers and went to look. People were running down the main path carrying sacks of goods and screaming children. From the north came the sound of drums, and more horns. Curio couldn't tell if the sounds were coming from other villages or from an army.

The villagers seemed to know what they were doing, though. There were a lot of shouted instructions, and people were running, but there was very little outright panic. They'd clearly had to do this before.

Father Perigrinus ran past Curio carrying a small wooden chest.

"Good, you're up," he said. "Take supplies from the church house and follow us into the woods. Take what you need to survive for a few days. But leave some supplies for the raiders, so they don't bother following us."

He was about to run off when he had another thought.

"You probably don't want to be caught with your prisoner," he said.

As he hurried off in to the darkness, Trio came out of the church house, leaning on Alba.

"Curio, help Pavo take Octa outside. And bring his sword, too."

"Are we setting him free?" asked Curio.

"Absolutely not."

Neither Curio nor Pavo wanted to risk untying Octa's legs, so they each took an arm and dragged him out of the church house.

“Come on, come on,” said Trio.

“Where are we going?” Curio asked.

“Where do you think?” said Trio, and started limping towards the fields.

* * * * *

49: HORSES

The two boys from the village who had been watching the horses were in a small patch of torchlight in the field, putting saddles and bridles on the horses.

Their torches must have weakened their eyes, because they didn't notice Curio until he was right on top of them.

“Sorry,” he said, holding up the sword. “I'm so sorry.”

They let go of the reins.

“Run,” he said. They didn't understand. He waved the sword and they backed away, and ran towards the village, shouting.

Trio hobbled out of the darkness, followed by Alba and Pavo, dragging Octa.

“Well done,” said Alba.

“Yes, great work, leaving me to do the heavy lifting,” said Pavo.

They hauled Octa face-down over the back of the horse. It wasn't easy, as he was struggling hard. Curio glanced back at the village. They didn't have long. It wouldn't be long before the boys gathered another a mob together.

Octa was squirming on the already skittish horse.

“Tie a rope to him,” said Pavo. “If he falls, let the horse drag him for a few miles.”

Curio got on the horse with Octa. Pavo and Alba got horses of their own. Alba was halfway through pulling Trio up onto her horse when the villagers charged. This time, they were armed.

Pavo raced off into the darkness without looking back, and Curio and Alba followed as fast as they could. Trio was face-down across the horse in front of Alba, in a very similar position to Octa. It wasn't the perfect riding position, but Alba still kicked her horse into a gallop. Curio found himself at the back of the pack.

"Hya!" he said. "Hya!"

His horse finally broke into a loping canter. Curio held the reins in one hand. In the other, with all his strength, he held onto Octa to keep him from slipping off the horse. The shouting of the villagers began to recede behind him. He risked one last look back. One of the faces in the torchlight was Perigrinus. He was far away, and Curio couldn't be sure, but Perigrinus didn't seem to be angry like the rest of the villagers. He seemed... disappointed.

* * * * *

50: SOUTH

They rode south on a wave of panic. Every town they passed through had recently heard the news of the invasion. The local boys and men were flooding to all the barracks for emergency training. Everyone was scared, and wary of strangers.

To make things worse, they were out of money, and acting wasn't an option. Luckily, Curio's friendly nature and his drinking habits saved him.

He got joking with a group of three northern lads who were on their way to Londinium for safety. They turned out to be the sons of rich Roman landowners.

After a few of Curio's crudest stories, they were treating him like an old friend. They took him to an inn and bought him some drinks in exchange for a few more stories. He walked out of the inn five hours later, weaving only slightly, carrying three moneybags full of *solidi*. Trio had a hard time accepting the money, but Pavo spent it before he could argue. They had a meal, bought new clothes, and were riding out of town before the boys woke up in the alley behind the inn.

The next five days took them back through Lindum. They were hoping to get onto Ermine Street, which would lead them directly to Londinium. But the refugees were already flowing, and word came from the road ahead that the towns of Causannae and Durobrivae had closed their gates in preparation for the invasion. With no alternative left open, they took the alternate route back through Verulamium.

* * * * *

51: THE GATES

Even before they got to Verulamium it was clear that the whole town was on edge. The shack-dwellers outside the walls guarded their doorways nervously, and met in the road for conversations that broke off as soon as a soldier or passer-by walked past.

As the actors reached the east gate they were stopped by town guards. Octa, who was still tied up face down on Curio's horse, started shouting out in Saxon. One guard drew his sword, but a second guard stopped him by drawing his own. There was a standoff while a messenger was sent to call the gate captain. Octa and the first guard had a conversation in Saxon, until the other guard ordered them to stop. The Saxon guard obeyed reluctantly, and there was a long uncomfortable silence, which was

broken when Pavo tried to slip the guards a few *solidi*. This led to some shouted questions about how a bunch of actors had come by this money.

The gate captain eventually arrived; a bearded, overweight and balding man with an unchangingly annoyed expression. When Octa saw him coming, he started shouting in Saxon again.

What's he saying?" said the captain.

The Saxon guard saluted. "Sir. He says he was kidnapped, sir."

"Not true," said Trio.

"Silence!" said the Saxon guard, raising his sword again. The guard captain pushed it back down.

"Calm," he said, and turned to Trio. "You. You're a priest? What are you doing with these people?"

Once again, Curio had the painful experience of listening to Trio earnestly explaining who they were and what they were doing.

"...It's an experiment, you see, to find out the value of the theatre in moral instruction, but we were ambushed outside this town, you see, and this man, who was meant to be our guard, ran off when he was meant to defend us, you see..."

The story went on and on. Curio looked around helplessly, and made eye contact with Alba, who gave a curiously apologetic shrug.

Trio kept on talking until he mentioned Primus, at which point the guard captain called over the Saxon guard and said something quietly. The Saxon guard didn't seem too happy, but he saluted and marched into the town.

Curio sidled up to Pavo, who was standing as far from the rest of them as possible, trying to look like he wasn't part of their group.

"What?" Pavo said.

Curio nodded towards the departing Saxon.

“This town is being defended by the same people it’s defending itself from?”

“I suppose.”

“That’s not good, is it?”

“It’s what the Empire does all the time,” said Pavo.

“You two,” called the captain. “Stop talking.”

“How many other towns do you think have Saxons defending them?” Curio asked Pavo quietly, when the captain was looking away again.

“How should I know?” Pavo said. “I’m not the idiot making the decisions.”

After a half hour the Saxon soldier came back with a message for the captain.

“Priest and Saxon,” he said.

The captain nodded. “Right. Get that man down from that horse.”

The gate guards hefted Octa down and untied his legs.

“Where are we going?” asked Trio.

“One of my superiors wants you,” said the captain.

“How long will this take?” asked Trio. “I have responsibilities!” No one answered. The Saxon soldier grabbed Octa by the rope that tied his hands behind his back, and shoved him forward into the town.

“You! Come!” he said to Trio.

“Excuse me. What about us?” said Alba.

The captain ignored her. He turned on his heel and walked back to his quarters.

“I’m sure everything’s fine!” Trio called back, as the soldier led him away down the street. “Don’t get into any trouble!”

* * * * *

52: THE CONFESSION

They left the horses at a stable yard, and walked through the town. If anything, the people were more uptight within the walls than they'd been outside. They walked past an old woman nailing planks across her windows. There was a crowd gathering around one of the residences, shouting incoherently. Some soldiers were standing at the sidelines, but it looked like they were too busy arguing amongst themselves to deal with the crowd.

"What's going on there?" asked Curio.

"No idea," said Pavo. "Drink?"

They ended up at a baker's stand near the forum that was selling overpriced food and drink to travellers. They sat at a rickety table dunking bread into a shared bowl of pork and leek stew, and discussed their next move.

"Trio has the rest of the money," said Alba.

Pavo put down his bread. "Hell," he said. "Why do we keep on trusting him with it? We should give it to the one person in our group who hasn't been shot, robbed or arrested."

Curio looked at Alba.

"I meant me!" said Pavo.

"Trousers," said Alba evenly.

"They were old," said Pavo. "I needed to get rid of them."

Curio spoke with his mouth full.

"We could go to Nasica," said Curio. "He'll help us out."

"Not a chance," said Alba.

"Back to your British Daddy?" said Pavo.

“Why not?” said Curio.

He’d been looking forward to the chance to tell Nasica the news about Octa and the Saxons. He still wasn’t certain what it all meant, but it seemed like a good idea to show Nasica that he was keeping his eyes open. He might even get a job out of it.

“You know, surprisingly, it’s not a completely thick idea,” said Pavo. “If we hand over Alba to Nasica then we can pretend to be official messengers and get free lodgings.”

“No one’s handing me anywhere,” said Alba.

“Really? Last time I checked, you were a slave who’d just been sold to Nasica,” Pavo said, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Actually, if we tried to keep you it would be theft.”

Alba was doing an excellent job of controlling herself, but there were bulges on the sides of her face from where her jaw was clenching.

“You’re not giving me to anyone before talking to Trio,” she said.

“In case you haven’t noticed, our walking martyr is away on business, which as the senior actor puts me in charge,” said Pavo.

“Why are you the senior actor?” said Curio.

Pavo raised one eyebrow and waved a hand up and down Curio, indicating his pork-stained tunic.

“Oh, right,” said Curio.

“Listen to me,” said Alba, and put both palms down on the table. “There are good reason why you shouldn’t hand me over.”

“Which are - ?” said Pavo.

“I can’t tell you,” said Alba.

“So you want us to break the law and keep a lippy slave away from her rightful owner on the basis of something that she refuses to tell us about? Well, I don’t know about you but I’m convinced,” said Pavo, and yawned.

“Curio, can I talk to you?” said Alba, standing up.

“Uh,” said Curio, and looked across at Pavo.

“Away from here,” said Alba.

Curio got to his feet, and Pavo dragged the soup bowl in front of him.

“Go on,” he said, not looking up. “Don’t mind me. Have your little private conversation, Curio. Watch out for her wiles.”

Curio followed Alba as she walked down the street in silence. He expected her to stop after they turned a corner and were out of view from Pavo, but she kept walking.

“Uh,” said Curio. “Are we running away?”

“I need to walk,” said Alba.

The sun was out, but there was a sting of cold in the air. Curio hadn’t noticed until now, but Autumn had set in during their journey. He realised that this was the first time he’d been alone with Alba since Perigrinus’s village. He caught himself scratching himself, and stopped, just in case she saw.

He tried breaking the silence.

“So, what’s the matter?” he said. “You were Primus’s slave anyway. Is Nasica really worse than Primus?”

She walked with her head down, not saying anything. He tried again.

“It’ll probably just be household stuff and looking pretty for guests. It won’t be so bad, after everything we’ve been through. You’re less likely to get shot by arrows. So that’s good. Right?”

She kept her eyes forward.

“It’s me, isn’t it. You’re going to miss my rolly-polly joviality.”

He should have known not to joke. Her stare made him feel like an idiot.

“Get this through your head, Curio,” said Alba quietly. “I don’t want *any* master.”

“What are your choices?” he said, raising his palms.

“None. But I won’t give him up without a fight.”

“Him? Who’s him?”

Alba stopped dead. Curio looked back at her.

“You’re with someone?” he said.

“Are you dense?” she said. “Have you not been paying attention to anything that’s been going around you?”

“No? Anything. Er. What?” he said. “Him? Who are you taking about? Me?”

“No!”

Curio’s heart sank.

“Who?” he said. “Pavo?”

Alba’s disgusted expression said volumes.

“Who then?” said Curio. “Perigrinus? No? Not Perigrinus? Surely not Trio?”

Alba glanced away, then looked back. A grin slowly grew on Curio’s face. It was so wide that it felt like his ears were going to meet at the back of his head.

“You and Trio? Really?”

She kept quiet.

“What? As in... a hard-fucking kind of way?”

If anything, she got quieter.

“For how long?”

Alba walked off again. Curio bounced on his heels as he followed her.

“So this is your big plan, is it? With all the prayer meetings and the good behaviour and everything? You seduced a priest! Brilliant for you. Well done!”

Alba looked back. Her glare could have demolished a fortress wall.

“Shut up,” she said.

“Of course! Of course. How’s his pizzle? Massive I’ll wager.”

She slapped him. Curio was so surprised that he almost walked into her.

“Stop,” she said. “Just stop. You treat everything like a joke. You’re allowed to. I’m not. And he can’t either. So please, just stop.”

Curio was opening his mouth to defend himself when he saw the look in her face. It shut him up.

“Confused,” he said. “Also, ouch.”

“Look, with Trio, I...” said Alba. “I know what he is, but... he...”

“You love him?” said Curio. “You love him!”

“Not exactly, but...”

His mind reeled. It made no sense. “I need to sit down,” he said.

On the corner opposite was an old wall-fountain with a bronze statue of a boy peeing into a tiny pond. The water had long since dried up. The grey-green moss growing around the statue’s penis looked exactly like a hideous case of the clap Curio had once seen on a man at the baths. Curio went to sit next to it, and when Alba was more composed she joined him.

“So what happened?” said Curio. “You were seducing him?”

Alba nodded. “At first.”

“Which is why he was being such a pious bag of cocks. He was panicking that someone would find out.”

Alba didn’t answer.

“Seriously, though. Why him?”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s...” Curio searched around for the right word. “...useless?”

“And I need a strong man?” said Alba sharply. “Someone to keep me in place?”

“Can Trio afford you? He’s going to marry you?”

“I don’t think so.”

Then why?”

“Listen!” said Alba, and looked like she was choosing her words carefully. “He’s the only man who’s ever given something up for me.”

“What?” said Curio.

“His faith.”

Wisely, Curio kept his mouth shut.

“Just promise me you won’t take me to Nasica,” she said. “Not before I’ve seen him again.”

“But he can’t afford...”

“Promise me,” she said.

There was an awkward pause.

“Right,” said Curio. “Fine.”

Alba looked back the way they’d come, and breathed in deeply.

“Come on, let’s go,” she said.

They walked back the way they’d come in silence. Before they reached the corner, Alba said, “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” said Curio.

“For not telling you everything. I’ve got to talk to him first.”

“Wait, what? About what?”

Before she could answer, they rounded the corner. Pavo was standing by the table where they had left him and talking to one of the town guards. He was pointing in the direction of Alba.

* * * * *

53: THE DELIVERY

“Ah, here they come right now,” said Pavo. “There she is. There’s the one I was talking about.”

Before Alba could open her mouth, Curio grabbed Pavo by the arm and led him away.

“Easy!” said Pavo, shaking himself free. “What’s got into you?”

“What the hell are you doing?” said Curio.

“Well, as chance would have it I got speaking to this guard, splendid bloke, and it turns out that they’re here to clear the road for Nasica...”

“Is something the matter?” said the guard.

“No,” said Pavo.

“Yes,” said Curio. “Look, I’m sorry, but there’s been a misunderstanding. My friend here thought that this slave had been sold to *comes* Nasica, but...”

Pavo stamped on Curio’s foot.

“Ow!”

“I’m sorry, but it’s *my* friend here who’s confused,” said Pavo. “The slave is Nasica’s property.”

“There are complications,” said Curio. He tried to stamp back, but Pavo had moved his foot out the way.

There was the sound of trumpets in the distance. The guard turned to look.

“Well, we can ask the man himself. Here he comes.”

A team of six soldiers were marching up the road ahead of the same ridiculous litter that they’d seen Nasica’s wife in the last time they were in Verulamium. Behind it was an entourage of carts carrying trunks and what looked like expensive furniture.

The guard called out to the soldiers at the front of the procession, who came to a halt.

“What’s going on here?” said Nasica’s personal slave, who had been walking at the side of litter.

“These two men have a slave for Nasica,” said the guard.

“No we don’t,” said Curio.

“Yes we do. There she goes,” said Pavo.

To her credit, Alba knew not to run. A running slave was in trouble. She was walking away calmly down the road.

“Stop her!” said Pavo.

Alba glanced back and tensed, ready to bolt, but there was another squad coming from further up the road. There was nowhere to go.

“What’s going on out there?” came a rumbling voice. A hand pulled open the curtain, and Nasica’s face looked out.

“There’s a slave girl for you,” said his personal slave.

Curio approached them.

“Excuse me...” he said. The slave held up a hand, palm towards Curio.

“Ah, yes, I remember her,” said Nasica. “From that party. Bring her along.”

“Sir!” said Curio. “Sir! It’s me!”

“What?” said Nasica looking at him. “And who are you?”

“Curio, sir. Imbicatos. The actor. You asked me to keep my eyes open.”

Nasica’s gaze wandered.

“Well done, well done. I really don’t have the time.”

The slave walked towards Curio with his arms outstretched, like he was trying to catch Curio before he could charge.

“I’ve seen things,” said Curio. “Up north, there’s an invasion...”

“Thank you for bringing me the slave,” said Nasica, and withdrew his head back into the litter.

“Wait sir!” Curio called. “The girl...”

“The girl what?” said Nasica’s personal slave.

Curio looked over at Alba, who was being led towards the litter by the guard. She was staring at him, and not blinking.

But, thought Curio, what chances did she have, anyway? It was just prolonging the inevitable. And where did his really loyalties lie? She was Nasica’s property, and he was Nasica’s man, after all. More or less.

“Nothing,” said Curio to Nasica’s slave. He felt Alba’s eyes boring in to him.

“This way please, sir,” said the slave, shepherding Curio out of the road.

He looked back in time to see Alba’s head-cloth disappearing into Nasica’s litter. He wanted to call out to her one last time, but it was too late. She would always know he was a bastard.

* * * * *

54: THE TOWNHOUSE

Which led to the biggest fight that Curio and Pavo had ever had. It might not have been so bad, but Curio wasn't just angry at Pavo, he was angry at himself.

“What in the fires of Hell and the Devil's greased knob did you do that for?”

“I got rid of a lippy woman and I scored us points with your big British man. You would have done it yourself if you weren't thinking with your cock.”

“Well at least I was using it to think about someone else!”

“What do you mean?”

“You're a ball-ache, Pavo! Haven't you ever wondered, in your whole life, why everyone hates you?”

“Shut up. You think I'm great.”

“I think you're a twat!” shouted Curio.

Pavo was taken aback.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because you're a twat! And you think everyone else is a twat! Like a twat would! You twat!”

“You really think I'm a twat?” said Pavo. His voice trembled slightly, but Curio was too angry to notice.

“Of course you're a twat! You call me a twat every day!”

“You liked it.”

“Fuck! Off!”

After that, they went their separate ways. Curio walked through the town alone, kicking rocks down the street and feeling sorry for himself. He ended up circling inside the town walls, and back to the gate where they'd first arrived.

There were still angry crowds milling around the town house from earlier, but they were beginning to clear. The soldiers had their swords drawn for show, and were waving a draco that was making an irritating whistling sound. The captain from the gate was loudly ordered people to disperse, and they were grudgingly obeying.

Just around the corner were some citizens playing a game of dice and pretending they had nothing to do with anything. Curio recognised their type from Londinium: Not exactly criminals, but only because they had their own ideas about just how far you could go before you could be considered criminal. They might take money from you if you had the wrong kind of accent or hit you if you gave them the wrong kind of look, but they were straightforward men who appreciated straightforwardness. Which meant that Curio couldn't talk to them for long. The longest conversation he'd ever had with a man like that had been exactly the same length of time that it took for the same man's wife to put on her clothes and secretly climb out of Curio's window.

Still, the men looked like they knew what was going on.

"It's because of that Roman bastard," said one of them, and spat on the ground.

"Which one?" asked Curio.

"You know the one. Politician from Londinium. Causing all the trouble."

The man had a few tribal tattoos around his neck. He looked like the leader of the group.

Curio had a horrible suspicion.

"Primus?" he asked.

"That's the one," said the man.

"Primus is in town?"

"He is. That's him, in there," said another man, nodding towards the reddish-brown townhouse. "The one that's going to be burning down tonight."

“What’s he doing in Verulamium?”

“Good old Nasica got him up here to have a nice little talk with him. Word is, he’s a traitor.”

“Primus is a traitor?” said Curio. He had to admit, the words sounded right.

“That he is,” said the tattooed man. “But there’s all sorts of shite about chain of command. The soldiers don’t know who to obey. Cowards. Doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Why not?” said Curio.

“Soldiers won’t save him,” said the man. “He’s all Roman. In Verulamium, it’s British or you’re dead.”

“Right,” said Curio, trying not to sound too Roman.

“Oi! Twat!”

Pavo’s voice echoed out from across the road. He was poking his head out of Primus’s side door.

“Get in here!”

Curio could feel the men’s eyes on him.

“I don’t know who that man is,” he muttered.

Running wouldn’t help. As they watched him, he walked, painfully slowly, into the home of Verulamium’s most hated man.

He pushed past Pavo at the door, and one of Primus’s slaves bolted it behind him. He didn’t make eye contact with Pavo.

“So,” he said. “Primus.”

“I heard,” said Pavo.

“This way, please,” said the slave, and walked out of the kitchen. Curio and Pavo shuffled after him. They came to the door, and had an embarrassed moment.

“You first.”

“No, after you.”

“I insist,” said Pavo with awkward politeness.

Curio walked through first, with his ears burning. They followed the slave down a narrow corridor.

“We should try and get out of here,” said Curio quietly, to break the ice. “The men out there want to burn this place to the ground.”

“Not our business,” said Pavo. “Let’s just talk to Primus, get out of our contract and go home.”

“Right.”

“Right.”

They turned down a wide corridor with mosaic floors, lit by thin beams of light from high windows.

“So you got here just now?” said Curio.

“Right before you. I was looking for a tavern and found Primus’s slave. He promised there was some wine around here somewhere.”

“And Trio and Octa?”

“Downstairs,” said Pavo. “I think they’re going to torture Octa. Do you want to watch?”

“It’s not my sort of thing.”

“Namby pamby. Come and watch. It’ll be great.”

* * * * *

55: THE CELLAR

At the end of the corridor was a flight of stairs down to the wine cellar. The slave led them down. Curio couldn't see much, but there was the smell of rat droppings and rotting wood. Someone was shouting below.

“Liar!”

“Is truth,” came Octa's voice.

The steps turned at the bottom, and the slave led them into a long cellar. The floor was covered in dust and the walls were lined with empty amphorae racks. There weren't any windows. From the look and the smell of the place, it hadn't been used in years.

Octa was in a pool of torchlight at the far end of the cellar, with his hands chained to a pulley above his head. Curio knew that Octa was big, but seeing him hung like that was remarkable. He looked like a load-bearing column. His cloak and tunic were gone, leaving him with nothing but a loin-cloth and a body that made Curio regret a lifetime of avoiding salad.

Primus stood in the corner of the cellar in his usual formal toga. Next to him was a man whose body-language and hot-coal brazier spelled the word ‘torturer’.

Father Trio was hopping up and down in front of Octa.

“Liar! Barbarian! Saxon heathen!”

“Father Trio, please,” said Primus.

“Priest kidnap me,” Octa growled. “Is war. I demand his head.”

“You threaten a priest?” said Trio. Octa didn't flinch.

“Silence! Both of you!” said Primus.

Trio scrunched up his face, but backed away.

Primus waved a hand at the actors. "You two. Come forward. You are welcome." It was an obvious lie, but traditional, and Primus was nothing if not bound by tradition.

Curio and Pavo stepped forward into the torchlight. The slave accompanying them bobbed his head and disappeared back up the stairs.

"Where is Alba?" said Primus. "Is she here?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," said Curio, keeping an eye on Trio's face. "We ran into Nasica in the streets."

Trio turned away.

"Oh," said Primus, disappointed. "Well. I suppose we don't need her. I'll be needing you to verify what this soldier says," said Primus. The torturer took a rod out of the brazier and looked at it. It wasn't glowing. He put it back.

Curio raised a finger.

"Um?" he said.

"Yes?" said Primus.

"What information are we trying to get out of him, exactly? I mean, what's there to know? He was meant to be protecting us, and instead he ran off like a hare shot from a buttered crossbow. There's no big questions here, right? I mean, the only big one is, 'what does it feel like to be a massive coward?'"

"He wasn't protecting you," said Primus. "He was protecting the trunk."

"Which trunk?"

"My trunk," said Trio turning back into the light. He was rubbing a sleeve across his eyes. "The one going to the Saxons."

"Why?" said Curio.

"Because it was full of gold."

Curio and Pavo glanced at each other. The torturer stopped, halfway through rattling the coals.

“Aaaaah?” said Pavo obsequiously, taking a small step forward. He clutched his hands together and tilted his head to one side. “Excuse me if I’m getting this wrong. Gold, you say?”

“Payment for the Saxons,” said Primus. “The Duke of the Saxon Shore was meant to use it to pay off the mercenaries, so they wouldn’t rebel. And this man, Octa, let it be stolen.”

“No,” said Octa.

Primus waved a finger under Octa’s nose.

“You ran off at the first sign of the robbers. True?”

“Very true,” said Pavo.

“So you were in on the robbery,” said Primus.

“No,” said Octa. “I am Saxon. I am Horza’s blood. I steal nothing.”

“Then you were using this theft as an excuse!” said Primus. “An excuse to attack Britain.”

“No!” said Octa.

“Then why did you run?”

“I did not run!” said Octa, bristling. “I hide. I wait. I watch. I watch where bandits take the chest. I follow them to their camp.”

“You were under orders to guard that chest with your life.”

“Orders from you,” said Octa. “Orders from Horza, find out who steals Saxon monies.”

“Why?”

“For justice,” he said. “To find out who is enemy of Saxons. And to get other moneys.”

“Sorry?” said Curio, raising a finger again. “I don’t want to be slow here, but... we were carrying gold?”

“Yes,” said Primus. “Trio, tell your men to keep quiet.”

“Yes, sir,” said Trio. “Curio, please.”

“Only, wouldn’t a whole lot of soldiers be better for that sort of thing?” said Curio. “We’re just actors!”

Primus sighed. “I tried to send payments up to the Saxons before,” he said. “Twice. Both times, the money went missing from under the noses of the armed guards. I had them tortured, but they couldn’t or wouldn’t tell me where the money had gone. This time I tried to send the payment covertly. Your tour was a reasonable excuse.”

“And no one told us we were carrying gold? Don’t you trust us?” said Curio.

Everyone in the cellar looked at him.

“Joking,” he said.

“Curio, if you please...” said Trio. Curio raised his palms appealingly.

“I’ll be silent as the grave,” he said.

Primus turned back to Octa. “You followed the bandits. Who took the money?” he said. “Do you know?”

“Yes,” said Octa.

“Who?”

“You,” said Octa evenly.

Primus didn’t say anything. He looked across at the torturer, who nodded, and took the glowing hot rod out of the coals.

Octa was undaunted. "When the bandits took the cart, I follow. I hide in bushes. They go to camp, they eat, they drink. I keep watching. They go to sleep. I kill two. Third I tie to a tree. I ask who he work for. He say nothing. I beat him to death with Peepee."

"With what?" asked Primus.

"Peepee. Man organ. Between legs. Peepee." Octa frowned, trying to express himself. "Peepee from the box. With strap. Big one."

Octa gave up trying to explain, and slumped down on the chains.

There was an awkward pause.

"Oh! Wait!" said Curio. "One of the codpieces? From the play?"

"Yes!" said Octa. "Big peepee. I beat him dead with peepee."

"Right!" said Curio, nodding. The idea of Octa bludgeoning one of the young bandits to death with a pink foot-long wooden phallus was remarkable.

Primus looked disgusted.

"You had codpieces?" he said. "No, never mind that. What about the gold? Where's the gold?"

"After I kill I take key, I open box, look inside."

"And?" said Primus.

"No gold."

"They took it out?"

"No!" said Octa. "I watch. I see. They take nothing. Box empty."

"Then where's the gold?"

"No gold!" said Octa. He rattled the chains. "You never give gold! Box empty all the time!"

The torturer stepped forward, but Primus put a hand on his shoulder.

“Wait! Are you saying I stole my own gold?” said Primus.

“You trick Saxons. Give empty box. Fake!” said Octa.

Primus released the torturer.

“Do it,” he said.

“Wait!” said Curio.

“Trio, I told you to silence your men.”

“I tried to lift that chest just before we put on the first play,” said Curio.

“It was heavy?”

“It was definitely full of something.” The memory made his back twinge.

“So,” said Primus, “Either Octa’s lying, or someone stole it between that performance and the bandits’ attack the next day.”

“Impossible,” said Octa. “Priest have key. No one touch box.”

“Oh,” said Trio.

Something about the way he said it made the whole room turn to look at him.

“Father Trio?” said Primus. “You have something to say?”

“I beg your pardon,” said Trio.

There was an awkward silence.

“I was drunk,” he said. “I’m not used to being drunk.”

A snarl grew on Octa’s face.

“Man took gold,” said Octa. “He order me away from wagon. He took key from drunk priest!”

“Which man?” said Primus.

Trio looked around the room like a puppy that had just done what was natural on a fine Indian carpet, and was wondering what all the shouting was about.

“I just had a few drinks, and he was telling me how important it was to trust in my superiors, and... and to accept the divine plan.”

“Who was this?” said Primus.

“Nasica,” said Trio.

Primus cleared his throat. “Get this man down,” he said to the torturer, who nodded and began to unchain the huge Saxon.

“You actors. Go upstairs and get Lupus. Tell him to prepare the guards.”

Octa pulled free of the chains and rubbed his wrists. Then he lunged forward and grabbed Trio by the throat.

“What are you doing?” said Trio. “Get off me!”

The torturer grabbed Trio by the wrists and looped the chain around them. Trio looked around in panic.

“What’s going on?” said Trio.

Octa let go. Primus stepped forward.

“Father Trio, in assisting the theft of the Saxon gold, you have committed treason against Emperor Constantine III,” said Primus.

The torturer pulled down on the chain hanging from the pulley, lifting Trio’s arms above his head.

“Wait!” said Trio. “This is a mistake!”

“Octa of the Saxons. A thousand apologies for your treatment,” said Primus. “I hope you can forgive us.”

“Gold,” said Octa. “Then forgive.”

“This is ridiculous!” said Trio. “You can’t blame the *comes*! His guards must have stolen the gold! They must ha-”

Octa punched Trio in the face. He slumped down and hung from the chains. Octa shook out his fingers.

“Enough,” he said.

Trio’s eyes rolled, and he gurgled.

Primus looked across at the actors.

“What are you waiting for?” he said. “Go to Lupus.”

Curio and Pavo hurried up the stairs, just as Octa started punching Trio in the kidneys.

* * * * *

56: THE ARREST

The group marched out of the front of the building with Primus leading, Lupus and Primus’s five bodyguards at the rear, and Curio and Pavo hustling along in the middle.

Curio walked closer to Pavo, and spoke quietly.

“You know this is all politics, right?” he said. “Primus is using this as an excuse to arrest Nasica before Nasica can arrest him.”

“Could be,” said Pavo. “But Nasica still stole the gold.”

“If he did, I bet he had a reason.” said Curio.

“Perhaps wanted to spend it,” said Pavo. “That’s a pretty good reason.”

“Ha ha. I just can’t believe he’s a thief,” said Curio.

“Why not?” asked Pavo. “Because he’s British? Or because you thought he was funny?”

As Curio was thinking this through, Lupus walked up next to them.

“Sirs? What are you doing out here?” the slave asked quietly. “You could have waited back in the residence.”

“We just wanted a word with your master. There’s a small matter of our contract,” said Pavo.

“This isn’t the time.”

“Whenever he’s available,” said Pavo. “We’re at your master’s disposal.”

The townspeople were giving the group dark glares.

“Or we could go back,” said Pavo.

“Too late now,” muttered Curio.

Halfway down the street someone threw a rock, which skittered on the cobbles in front of Primus. The soldiers drew their swords, but couldn’t work out who’d thrown it. After a tense moment, they all moved on.

Curio spotted the tattooed man he’d seen outside Primus’s house. He was sharpening something large on a stone wall.

“We should get more soldiers,” said Curio.

Lupus kept his eyes straight ahead. “Half the soldiers in this town are loyal to Nasica.”

“Then get the other half,” said Pavo.

Curio found himself missing Trio. If it came to a fight, Curio would have wanted at least one person around who would make him look good in comparison. He felt guilty thinking about it, though. The look in Trio’s eyes back in the cellar had been heartbreaking.

“Poor Trio,” he said to himself.

“He had it coming,” said Pavo. “We didn’t have the gold, but he kept us going north anyway. For what? We could have been killed.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Curio.

“Course I’m right,” said Pavo. “We could be home by now. And he made us do that play.” He spat on the ground. “Torture’s too good for him.”

* * * * *

57: THE WIFE

At the very least, Curio expected a few arrows as they approached Nasica’s villa.

“Why don’t we wait here?” he suggested to Pavo as they passed the vineyards.

“Stay if you want,” said Pavo. “You can join us when your balls drop.”

But getting into the villa wasn’t a problem. The front doors were unbolted, and the entranceway was empty. The only person around was one of Nasica’s older slaves, sweeping the floor of the peristylum. He didn’t seem particularly surprised to see Primus’s invasion team, and pointed them towards the rear of the villa.

They crept through the banquet hall. The rear door led to Nasica’s well-tended garden, and the half-completed woman’s quarters. From its doors came a screaming voice and the sound of shattering pottery.

Primus held up a hand, and everyone stopped. He pointed to the head of his bodyguards, who saluted.

Pavo leant over Curio’s shoulder. “Is that Nasica’s wife in there?” he asked. “If it is, she can’t see me.”

Curio dislodged Pavo with a shrug.

As the guard approached the door, a water basin flew out at head height. The guard flattened his back against the wall, and edged towards the door with his sword half-unsheathed. He glanced inside, and the screaming grew louder. After a long moment he turned and beckoned to the others. Curio followed Primus, Lupus and a reluctant Pavo into the room.

It took a few moments to adjust to the dark, and the volume. Nasica's wife was screaming on the other side of a wide bed. Every time she ran out of breath she picked up whatever was closest at hand – a box of face-powder, a vase of scraping-oil - and threw it at one of the two young slave girls were huddled in the opposite corner. She was wearing a silk indoor gown, and her hair was still piled in a tower on top of her head. It bobbed around as she slung a silver tray at the slaves.

“Bastard!” she screamed. “British Bastard!”

Despite the wife's sunken cheeks and thin arms she had a remarkable stamina, and it took a long time to calm her down. Primus offered her promises, assurances and threats, and she screamed through all of them. The only good moment was when Pavo claimed that he knew how to put women in their place. When he approached her she hit him in the mouth with a solid wooden wig-stand.

After an hour she seemed to have gotten it all out of her system. She stuck out her jaw and addressed Primus.

“My husband has left me,” she said. “He's gone to Clausentum. He thinks the Saxons are attacking. He's taken everything.”

Pavo, still nursing a bleeding lip, raised an eyebrow at Curio, who replied with a surreptitious obscene gesture.

“Clausentum,” said Primus, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “The bastard's fleeing the country.”

* * * * *

58: CLAUSENTUM

Clausentum was a small port town on a spit of land in the Itchen river. A lot of the shipping business came through it since the Thamesis had become over-silted, and even though there were occasional pirate raids, a steady stream of carts still came and went through the main town gates. Pavo grumbled as they approached.

“Bugger the contract,” he said. “I want no part of this.”

Primus had personally requested that the actors stay with him, and Curio could guess why. They knew more about Primus’s political situation than they should. He rightly didn’t trust them to keep their mouths shut, so he couldn’t let them go. And he couldn’t risk having them arrested, either, in case they said something to the wrong kind of soldier.

So Curio and Pavo were stuck with the bodyguards in an old, bone-jarring carriage, while Primus, Lupus, Octa and the head guard led the way in a much grander carriage that had its own built-in travel couches.

Curio was quite glad not to be sharing a carriage with Octa. Primus had been treating the Saxon as a guest of honour and making sure his every need was met, which made sense considering that Octa might be the only man capable of averting a full-on war. Octa seemed to accept the hospitality, but Curio suspected that he was still harbouring a grudge. As they were preparing for the journey, Curio had caught Octa staring at him a little too intently.

Curio looked out of a gap in the panelling on the side of the carriage. The streets of Clausentum were dirtier and livelier than Verulamium. Sailors needed to be

entertained when they got to dry land, and there were rows of wine houses, whore houses and gambling dens lining the road down to the docks. The two carriages passed a huddle of sailors lying in the sun and passing around a jug of beer. Curio would have given anything to join them.

The carriages turned right at the town's forum, and headed north. Curio could see the masts of ships in the riverside docks. Between them was a large mechanical device mounted on a wooden tripod.

"Look!" said Curio. "A ballista!"

"So?" said Pavo.

"Nothing. I just like ballistae," said Curio.

They trundled past the forum towards the Clausentum barracks. The main building had guard towers at its corners, and was flying a red flag above the main gate. It included a picture of a dragon and a naked woman. Curio's eyes were immediately drawn to it.

"Hey!" he said. "Nasica's emblem."

Pavo poked his head out of the window of the carriage. "So it is."

The barrack gates were open and there didn't seem to be anyone guarding them. Curio caught a glimpse of movement in the guard towers.

"I don't like this."

He climbed out of the rear of the carriage and dropped down on to the road. The horses pulling it were trotting at a fair speed, and Curio had to sprint to catch up with the front carriage.

The panelled sides of Primus's carriage were cut with hundreds of symmetrical star-shaped holes. Curio rapped his knuckles on it.

"Stop!" he said.

“Who is that?” came Primus’s voice from inside. “Leave us alone.”

“You’ve got to stop! It’s a trap!”

He stopped running, and put his hands on his knees while he caught his breath. From the barracks came the low sound of a horn. There was a repetitive clinking as the front gate slowly lowered. Primus’s head bodyguard, driving the front carriage, saw what was happening and slowed the horses.

Curio looked up. There were archers in the guard towers, and they were readying their crossbows. He turned and ran. From behind him came the command “release!” and the whipping sound of arrows. He glanced back. Both carriages were still turning in the street, painfully slowly.

He kept on running until he felt a deep cold burn in his lungs. He heard a pounding that he thought was his own heart, and Primus’s carriage overtook him with the horses at a gallop.

“Hey!” he called. “Wait!”

The carriage came to an intersection and took the turn so fast that the wheels slid on the cobbles. The second carriage came up behind Curio, and as it took the turn, he threw himself at it, and grabbed on.

His hands caught the leather of the one of the rear flaps, and his feet gave way. One of his boots popped off as he was dragged along the ground.

“Help!” he called.

Firm hands grabbing his arms, and Primus’s bodyguards pulled him into the carriage. Out of the gap, he could see that the front carriage was nearing the town gate. The guards must have heard the horn, because they were lowering the portcullis to block the road. The only thing stopping them was an ox-cart that was stuck halfway

through. The ox was getting some shade in the gate, and the driver was desperately tugging on the ropes to get the reluctant animal to move.

As the front carriage reached the gate, one of the guards tried to block them. The horses didn't slow down, and he leapt out of the way.

The horses made it through the gate, but there wasn't enough space for the carriage. The star-covered wooden side-panel of the carriage was torn open by a jutting edge of the ox cart. The noise frightened the ox, which started running, pulling the cart clear of the gate. The portcullis began to lower again just as the second carriage rode through the gates.

Curio winced as it came down. For a moment it looked like they would make it through untouched, then the metal teeth on the underside of the portcullis caught the back of the carriage. There was a crunch of splintering wood. The front wheels were jerked up off the ground, and the back third of the roof of the carriage tore away. The rest of the carriage dropped back down, skidded, and locked into the wheel-grooves in the road.

Curio looked back. The portcullis was closed, with the roof-section of the carriage crushed beneath it. Several soldiers were running after them, but the panicking horses were far outpacing them. It looked like their pursuers were giving up. Curio let out a long, slow breath.

The carriages took a turn onto a dirt track before Venta Belgarum, and the horses slowed down to a slow canter. After a bumpy ride through a small forest they came out into open wheat fields. Nestled among them was a run-down villa. When the carriages stopped outside it, a small team of slaves ran out to tend to the horses. Curio, Pavo and the bodyguards climbed down from the carriage.

"I know this farm," said Curio. "This was one of Musca's."

Pavo looked around. "It's nice being rich," he said.

Lupus came out of the front carriage. His hands and tunic were red, and his face was sickly grey.

"Octa," he said.

Curio and Pavo ran to look. Through the ripped side of the carriage came a terrible smell. Octa had an arrow in his guts, and had soiled himself. Primus, pulling a face in disgust, was trying to get to the carriage door without touching the body.

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59: VILLA HEADQUARTERS

The villa went into defensive lockdown. One bodyguard kept a lookout in the woods, and another stayed on the roof. Lupus was sent back into Clausentum in peasant clothes to see what he could dig up, and Curio and Pavo were given a room near the entrance of the villa, and two straw mattresses. The room was quiet, and had a scroll-rack filled with erotic stories from Greece. Curio wasted no time getting into them. Pavo was restless, though, and spent the rest of the day walking from room to room in the villa and sneering at the unfashionable wall decorations. That evening, he came back into their room and sat with his arms folded while Curio read the scrolls.

"Admit it," said Pavo.

"Admit what?"

"That Nasica's a thief and Primus is a hero."

"Really?" said Curio without looking up. "I thought Primus was the one who hired the Saxons in the first place."

Pavo sulked. "Still though Bloody Brits. Stealing and lying."

“Same as the Romans,” said Curio.

“It’s the end of civilisation.”

“Probably,” said Curio. “Listen to this bit. The virgins have just been washed up on the isle of the two-cocked giants.”

The next morning, Lupus returned to the villa with bad news. He’d asked around the docks, and found out that Nasica wouldn’t be in Clausentum for long. The word amongst the dockworkers was that Nasica had chartered a large transport ship from a loyalist called Senacus in the nearby port of Noviomagus. The ship was currently being made ocean-ready and fitted with a luxury cabin for Nasica, and it would be sailing to Clausentum to pick up Nasica within two days.

After Lupus delivered his report, Primus called together a meeting of his bodyguards in the rear courtyard. With nothing better to do, Curio and Pavo tagged along.

“We have exhausted our options,” Primus told the bodyguards. “We have two days to retrieve that gold, or the whole of Britain will fall to the Saxons. We have no friends and no allies. Our only option is to strike hard, and hope our blow is accurate.”

Not one of the five guards let a single muscle in their face move at this news. Curio was impressed.

“I am truly sorry that it has come to this,” said Primus, enunciating in the rolling style of a forum news announcer. “I know that the chances of our deaths are high. I also know that, should you fail, Britain will be lost to barbarians, perhaps forever. Because of this, I believe that the Lord himself will protect our mission. He will smile on us, and let us defeat the vile Nasica. Have faith.”

It was the sort of thing that Trio would have said, and it made Curio very uneasy.

* * * * *

60: MIDNIGHT EXIT

That night, Curio was shaken awake by Pavo.

“Get up. We’re getting out of here.”

Pavo was already dressed, and holding a candle. Curio yawned and blinked, trying to get his eyes to work.

“What?” he said. “Why?”

“Because if we stay, we’re dead,” Pavo whispered.

Curio pulled on his trousers, boots and tunic. His clothes hadn’t been changed for a while. They were starting to smell a bit like vinegar. Curio longed for a decent bath.

They walked through the dark passages, heading for the villa’s rear entrance.

“How are we going to get past the guards?” Curio whispered.

“They suggested it,” said Pavo. “They’re getting out too.”

“So where are we going? Back to Londinium? Will it be safe?”

“It don’t know,” said Pavo. “You’ve got family in Isca Dumnoniarum, don’t you?”

“I thought you hated Isca Dumnoniarum.”

“Death is worse. Probably.”

They walked into the cold air of the Atrium. Curio could hear a distant cockerel crowing.

“Stay here,” said Pavo. I need to talk to the guard at the back.”

He left through the dark corridor towards the back of the villa. Curio shivered and looked around. Primus had set up a desk here, and it was covered in documents:

A plan of Clausentum, a map of the south coast of Britain, and a wax tablet jotted with a rough schedule of attack. Curio picked up the tablet.

- I. Dawn. Dressed as slaves. Swords in cart.
- II. Enter camp of *limitae*. Issue commands at sword point.
- III. Approximately 20 men on wall incl. archers. Control of wall. Win over troops with testimony of Nasica's treachery.
- IV. Docks. Use ballista. Destroy guard towers and barracks gate.
- V. Assault on Barracks with wall guards and *limitae*.

No wonder the guards were leaving. Curio looked over to the coastal map, and the plan of Clausentum. Primus's plan was terrible. If Curio were in charge, he wouldn't even consider a full-on assault. There had to be a hundred ways to separate Nasica from his treasure chest. An idea started to form in Curio's mind. He took the stylus and started to make notes on the tablet.

Someone came into the room behind him.

"Just a second," he said, not looking up. "I've almost got it."

"What are you doing? Put that down!"

It was Lupus, and he was staring at the tablet in Curio's hand.

"That's mine! What are you doing here? Why are you awake? You're not meant to be reading that. Guards!"

"Now, hold on, it's all right..."

"Guards!" called Lupus again.

The rear guard ran in from the back corridor, followed by Pavo. Another guard came down the stairs. Curio put the tablet down and backed away from the table.

Primus came down the stairs after the guard, wearing a blanket. He held it around himself to protect his modesty.

“What’s going on here?” he said.

“I caught this actor spying,” said Lupus.

“No, wait! Hang on! I was just looking,” said Curio.

The guards advanced on him. He tried to dodge, but they were experienced. One of them grabbed him, spun him around and shoved him face-first into the wall. The other grabbed his arms and held them behind his back.

“I heard him talking about his support for Nasica back in Verulamium,” Lupus said.

“No, well yes, but...” said Curio.

The soldiers pushed him harder into the wall, squeezing the air out of him. He gasped.

“Idea!” he squeaked.

“What was that?” said Primus.

The guards released enough pressure for him to take a croaking breath.

“I said I have an idea!” he said.

The guards squeezed him again.

“What’s this?” said Primus.

“How to get the gold!” Curio croaked.

They dragged Curio from the wall, and shoved him down onto his knees.

“You can get my gold back?” said Primus.

“Yes!” said Curio. He gasped for breath.

“If this is another joke,” said Primus, “you will die.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Curio saw Pavo slowly backing towards the rear entrance.

“No joke,” said Curio. “I’ve done this a thousand times.”

* * * * *

61: THE SEAL

Getting into Clausentum wasn’t as difficult for a lone man on foot. Curio had been ready to give the gate guards a story about picking up spices for his master, but after a week without a proper bath he looked and smelled like a local peasant, and the guards couldn’t afford to keep the gates closed long with all the trade coming through. They let him in without even checking for weapons.

The difficult part was the waiting. To look inconspicuous, he lay on the grass verge just outside the forum and pretended to be a sailor enjoying the sun. This lasted less than an hour before he got sunburnt on his arms and cheeks, and he moved into the shade under a wall that was painted with an advertisement for the local fishmonger.

Just before noon, as Curio was seriously considering going off to buy some olive oil to soothe his burns, Alba came out of the slaves’ entrance of the barracks with a basket under her arm. He followed her from a distance until she was out of sight of the barracks, and walked up beside her.

“Good morning,” he said.

She glanced at him with a disappointing lack of surprise.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Aren’t you pleased to see me?”

“Should I be?”

Buttering her up wouldn't work. He tried a direct approach.

“I need your help.”

Alba turned into the forum. There was a market on, and the rows of stalls were selling all sorts of goods, from chickens to pepper to hunting-bows.

“I need you to get something for me. For us,” Curio corrected.

“I'm not your slave,” she said.

“I know. But you're the only one who can help. We need Nastica's seal.”

“This one?”

Alba held up a letter marked at the bottom with a wax impression of Nastica's maiden-and-dragon emblem.

“Not the wax,” said Curio. “The actual stamp.”

Alba went to a stall and started examining quinces.

“That would definitely be against the wishes of my master,” she said.

“I know,” said Curio. He glanced at the stall-holder, and lowered his voice.

“This isn't about obeying orders. This is your chance to do the right thing.”

“The right thing is to follow my master's wishes.”

“All right,” said Curio. “It has nothing to do with the right thing. This is something for you.”

Alba raised an eyebrow. She put four large quinces into her basket, and showed the letter with Nastica's seal on it to the stallholder, who nodded. Alba moved on.

“How is it for me, then?” she asked.

“This is your chance to be yourself,” he said.

She looked at him doubtfully.

“You know what it’s like on stage,” he said. “You know that feeling of being in control, and taking the moment. Well this is like that, with your whole life.”

She walked away, heading for a spice merchant down the row.

“Alright, look,” said Curio. “That seal will save everyone’s life. It’s the only thing that can stop the Saxons. After this is over, Vitalianus will reward you.” He hadn’t thought it would be so hard to get a slave to agree to something.

“If I get caught stealing, I’ll be killed,” said Alba.

“Possibly.”

“You want me to risk my life, then.”

“I know,” said Curio. “And I’m sorry. But there’s got to be something that’s worth it for you. Don’t you want to see Trio again?”

“I don’t know,” said Alba. Her voice shook very slightly. “But you don’t have him with you, do you?”

“Why do you think that?” said Curio.

“If you did, then why isn’t he here to convince me to get the seal, instead of you?”

It was a very good point.

“What do you want, then? For the seal?” asked Curio.

Alba reached the spice merchant, and began looking through the pots of crushed herbs.

“Freedom,” she said.

“What? How? You can’t really be free can you? You’re a woman.”

Alba shot him a glare, and he regretted saying it.

“All right,” he said. “What about a letter from Primus promising to buy you, and then release you into marriage?”

“To whom?” she asked.

“To whoever will to marry you,” said Curio.

She thought about it.

“To whoever I will to marry,” she said.

“Fine.” It was ridiculous, but they needed the seal.

“And I’ll need money.”

“Really?” said Curio.

“You wanted me to take chances,” said Alba.

“It can be arranged,” said Curio, trying to hide his desperation. “Can you get the seal?”

“It’s in Nasica’s chamber. On the table by his bed.”

Curio didn’t want to know how she knew that.

“Thank you,” he said, taking a step backwards in relief.

“I’ll meet you at the town gates after sundown,” she said. “Wait for me if I’m not there.”

“I will,” said Curio.

Alba pointed into a pot. The spice merchant scooped some yellow powder from it onto a square of cloth, and tied it up neatly for her.

“I’ll see you then,” Curio said. He started walking away.

“Curio?” said Alba. “Is Trio still alive?”

Curio did his best not to hesitate.

“He’s fine,” he said. “Trio’s all right.”

* * * * *

62: THE RETURN

An hour after sunset Alba came out of the town gate carrying Nasica's seal in her travel-bag. She met up with Curio and showed it to him, and he suppressed the urge to kiss her.

"Was it hard to get it?" he asked.

"No," she said. "He was fast asleep by the time I left."

They walked to the pick-up point that Curio had arranged with Lupus. There was a carriage waiting for them, which Curio was relieved to see was the one with the ruined back section, rather than the one with the remains of Octa.

"Who's this?" asked Lupus.

"She's the slave who stole the seal," said Curio. "We're taking her with us."

Lupus checked his tablet. "My master didn't agree to that," he said.

Curio felt Alba's eyes on him.

"We can't leave her, or she'll tell them who has the seal," said Curio.

Lupus looked unhappy, but he couldn't argue. He ushered them into the back of the carriage, and took the driver's seat. It wasn't long before they were rattling back along the dirt track to the villa.

"Why doesn't Primus know I'm coming?" asked Alba, breaking the silence.

"I'm sorry. I didn't get a chance to tell him."

"I wouldn't stay after stealing a seal."

"I'm sorry," said Curio. "I didn't think."

"You at least told Primus about my deal, didn't you?"

"No, I told you, I haven't seen him. But it'll be alright, won't it? He needs the seal more than anyone."

Alba leaned back and folded her arms across her chest. The carriage rode through the field, and to the front of the villa. Some torches were burning on the wall-mounts, and the bodyguards were loading travel-supplies into the other carriage. Curio could see the rip along the side-panel. He hoped that they'd cleaned Octa's remains out of the interior.

Inside the villa, at the table in the atrium, Primus was finishing a letter. He looked up as Curio and Lupus came in.

"Did you get it?" he asked.

Curio held up the seal.

"Perfect," said Primus. He melted a stick of red sealing wax on a candle, dripped it onto the page, and stamped Nasica's seal onto it.

"There," he said, handing it to Curio. "You know what to do with it. My guards are ready to take you to Noviomagus. If all goes to plan, I'll meet you in Dubrae the day after next. Whatever you do, get onto that ship."

Curio nodded. Primus had apparently forgotten that this was all Curio's plan.

Primus noticed Alba standing behind him. His mouth opened.

"Ah, good," he said. "Alba."

"Oh, yes. Alba," said Curio. "She stole the seal for you. She risked her life for it. I told her you would be grateful."

"I am," said Primus.

"I agreed with her that for getting the seal, you would buy her back, and release her into marriage with whoever she chooses."

"Why would I do that?" said Primus, frowning slightly. "That's not a fair agreement."

“She risked her life for the seal.”

“Well, that’s well and good, but she’s a slave. You can’t bow to her wishes. And you shouldn’t have been making promises on my behalf.”

Curio wanted to back down, but felt Alba’s eyes burning into him. He swallowed.

“It would only be fair if you would consider-”

“No,” said Primus. “For goodness sakes, the bodyguards are waiting for you in the carriage. Alba can spend the night here, and we can discuss what I think is a suitable reward for her actions in Dubrae. Now go.”

Alba walked with Curio down the corridor towards the main entrance.

“You’re a cock,” she said quietly.

“What?”

Alba kept her eyes down, and her poise subservient. She kept her teeth together, and spoke so quietly that Curio could barely hear her.

“You’re a cock. You’ll say anything to get what you want out of people. I’m worse than a slave now. I’m a thief. And that doesn’t matter to you, because you’re a cock.”

She walked away down a side corridor, and Lupus pointed her towards the slave quarters.

Alba’s quiet words lodged in Curio’s gut. And something about the way she had held herself, the way she had been touching her belly, made Curio very uneasy. The feeling stayed with him throughout the long journey to Noviomagus, in a carriage that still smelled like Octa’s dying crap.

* * * * *

63: THE SHIP ARRIVES

The next afternoon, the ship docked in Clausentum. Nasica's guards temporarily called off the search for the missing slave girl and the seal and, in a formation four lines deep, carried the chest of gold down to the docks, with Nasica in the lead.

The captain met Nasica with a salute.

"Sir," he said. "My patron Senacus sends his greetings."

Nasica inspected the ship. It was a large transport, with a single square sail and the traditional figurehead of a swan on the stern, which made the ship look like it was facing the wrong way. There was an upright cabin near at the aft of the deck, and some steps going down to the hold below.

"Is she ready?" asked Nasica, looking up at the sails.

"She is," said the captain. "We have a cabin below for your cargo, a furnished one for yourself, and enough berths for twenty soldiers."

"Very good," said Nasica. "My men just need to check the ship before we load. I can't be too careful. My seal was stolen last night."

"As you wish," said the captain. Nasica signalled to his guards, and two rows of them marched up the gangplank.

* * * * *

64: ON THE SHIP

Curio leant over the grain-sacks and pressed his eye to a hole in the floor. He peeked down into the secure cabin below.

There were footfalls of soldiers as they came down the stairs.

“Is this it?” he heard one of them say.

“It is,” said a voice.

The top of one of the soldiers’ helmets came into view. The soldier inspected the small, empty cabin, and tapped the wooden walls with his knuckles.

“Oak?” he said.

“Aye,” said the sailor behind him, out of sight. “Six inches.”

“And the door can be bolted?”

“Right. From the inside and the outside.”

“Good.”

The soldier tapped the walls one last time, and left the cabin.

Curio leant back, relieved. It was working.

He was amazed at how easy it had been to get on board the ship. Senacus, the wealthiest man in Noviomagus, had accepted the letter with Nasica’s seal without question, although the real crew members of the ship were a lot less happy when they were told they had to be replaced.

Curio heard the deck cabin door opening behind him, and quickly busied himself by gathering sacks of flour into his arms, doing his best to look like a sailor.

“What’s going on in here?” said a soldier behind him. Curio didn’t look back.

“Securing these sacks. Came loose since we left port.”

He dropped the sacks into the open trunk next to him.

“We’re bringing our own food,” said the soldier.

“Aye?” said Curio. “Well, this is a little extra. Flour and wine, from of our patron Senacus.”

He pointed at the amphorae stacked near the front of the deck cabin. The soldier went to one and unstopped it. He sniffed at the wine, and poked one of the sacks with the tip of his sword.

“All in order?” said Curio.

“All in order,” said the soldier, and closed the cabin door behind him.

Curio blew out slowly, and lifted one more flour sack into the trunk, revealing the stash of weapons beneath.

After the ship had been checked, the four guards standing at each corner of the chest lifted it and carried it on board. They took it down and into the secure cabin, closing and bolting the door from the inside. Another guard secured a second bolt on the outside, and the rest of the soldiers began bringing on all the food, wine and fresh water needed for the journey, as well as trunk after trunk of Nasica’s personal goods.

Just as the final goods were being loaded, a the soldiers on the docks shouted out a warning. A black cloaked figure was running down the street towards the docks with both hands raised.

“Stop!” called the man. “Stop!”

The soldiers on the dock drew their swords. The ones who were loading the ship came out onto the deck to look. The man ran towards Nasica, but slowed down when he saw the soldiers’ swords. He came to a stop, and kneeled before Nasica.

“Sir!” he said.

Nasica looked down at the man.

“I know you,” he said. “You’re that priest who brought the terrible play.”

“Father Trio, Sir,” said Trio.

“You’re Primus’s man.”

The soldiers on the boat came down onto the dock with drawn swords. Trio raised his hands.

“No! Please! I’m not his man! He had me arrested for my part in helping you get the gold! He locked me in his cellar and had me tortured!”

Nasica raised a hand, and the soldiers held back.

“Then what are you doing here?”

“I was set free, sir. Your soldiers in Verulamium raided his house and found me. I had to come to warn you as soon as I could. Primus knows you have his gold, Sir! He won’t let you escape. He’s going to try to stop you before you leave!”

Nasica glanced at his guard-captain, who nodded and raised an arm in the air.

“Perimeter formation!” he called.

The soldiers on the dock and the remaining soldiers on the deck spread out, and formed a wide semicircular perimeter around the ship.

The guard captain at Nasica’s side nodded to himself, satisfied.

“That should do it, until we’ve loaded the last of the-”

“Wait,” said Nasica.

He looked around carefully. Something was out of place.

Sailors were loading another boat on the far end of the docks. Vendors were calling out in the forum. The town wall was visible over the rooftops of the houses and official buildings. A fishing boat was rowing down from the north, but otherwise, the river was empty. The makeshift camp of the town’s Limitae forces was on the opposite river bank. On the docks were himself, Trio, and his soldiers. Four personal guards were protecting him and his guard captain from Trio.

But something was wrong. He looked around one more time, and spotted it.

The fishing boat on the river didn't have any rods or nets. There was just one man in it, rowing furiously towards the side of the ship.

"It's a trick!" called Nasica. The soldiers looked around.

"There!" said Nasica, pointing. "Look!"

Curio was dragging the chest along the deck. He could see Pavo's rowing boat coming up to the side of the ship, but everything was happening too soon.

He picked up the chest. It was ridiculously heavy, and he felt a blinding flash of pain in his back. He stumbled, but somehow kept his balance. He could hear the soldiers running up the gangplank, and up from below deck. He was out of time.

He hauled the chest over the side of the boat and tipped it into the river, and dived after it. He hit the ice-cold water feet first. There was a second of darkness, and he came to the surface, gasping for air.

There were shouts from above him, and another splash. One of the soldiers had dived in after him, wearing full armour. Curio swam away as fast as he could, but the soldier didn't come back to the surface. Something else splashed into the water, narrowly missing his head. A soldier had thrown a sword.

Miraculously, the chest was still floating. It had enough air in it to keep it just above the surface. Pavo rowed up next to it, pulled the oars into the boat, and grabbed the chest. The weight of it almost overturned the boat, and Pavo gave up.

"Help!" called Curio.

Above him, some of the soldiers were taking off their armour. Others were getting off the ship and running downriver, hoping to catch the boat before it got any further. A horn sounded, calling for reinforcements from the wall.

“Here,” said Pavo, holding out an oar. Curio grabbed the end and pulled himself up onto the boat. He couldn’t believe how heavy he was, especially in wet clothes. He flopped into boat and gasped for air.

“What the hell are you doing?” said Pavo. “Get up!”

Curio pulled himself up to Pavo’s side. Together they managed to lift the chest onto the boat. Then they each took an oar, and rowed like mad.

Archers from the barracks had heard the horn and were running to the docks. Curio and Pavo barely had time to hide behind the trunk before the first wave of arrows hit.

“This was a very bad idea!” said Pavo. “Very very bad!”

The river current was taking them downstream, and they were almost around the curve in the river. As they passed the end of the town wall, another wave of arrows came down on them from above.

“I will never listen to another one of your suggestions!” screamed Pavo. “I will never listen to another word you say!”

One of the arrows had hit the boat and cracked the wood. A stream of water poured in below the waterline. A crowd of villagers and dockhands was gathering at the bank of the river to watch them sink. Curio gave them a little wave.

“What are you doing?” screamed Pavo.

“Might as well give them a show.”

There was a mechanical sound from the docks. Curio looked around. One of the soldiers had loaded the ballista, and was aiming it.

“Get out of the boat!” said Curio.

“What? We’ll drown!”

“I said get ou-”

The boat exploded with an ear-splitting crack that echoed out across the river.

Splinters flew from the high-speed impact of the iron ballista dart.

“The gold!” shouted Nasica. “Don’t shoot at my gold!”

A white cloud was rising up from the sinking remains.

“Is that smoke?” Nasica asked the guard-captain next to him. “Can Ballistae burn wood like that?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

Nasica watched as the white cloud blew away, sinking downwards towards the river rather than dispersing.

“That’s not smoke,” he said. “That’s flour! The chest was full of flour! Get back here! The gold is still on the ship!”

Behind him was a clatter as the gangplank dropped away. The ship was moving.

“Ignore the rowboat!” he called to the soldiers who were stripping off their armour and swimming out into the river. “It’s a trick! The gold’s on the ship! Stop the ship!”

It wasn’t sailing very fast, but it didn’t have to. The arrows from the archers on the dock had absolutely no effect on it. The only sailors on deck were protected by the deck cabin. Even though the ship was barely moving, there was nothing anyone could do to stop it.

“The ballista!” shouted Nasica. “Use the ballista!”

A soldier saluted. “Sir, it only had one bolt loaded. The rest are in the armoury.”

“Well get them!”

“Sir!” said the soldier, and ran off towards the barracks.

Nasica stood on the docks, opening and closing his hands helplessly, watching the ship with all his money in it sail away. Next to him, Trio was keeping the straightest face he could.

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65: SAILING

A rope lowered into the water, and Curio held on. Primus's head bodyguard pulled him up onto the deck.

"All right?" said the man. "Nothing broken?"

"All fine," said Curio. "A couple of splinters. And you?"

"No trouble," said the guard. "They all thought we were sailors until it was too late." He pointed his thumb at the bodies of two of Nasica's soldiers, slumped against the door to the lower deck. "They were the only ones on board who weren't locked in that cabin."

"And how are those four doing?"

"We'll wait for a while, and then ask for their swords. They should be happy to exchange them for food and water a few days from now."

Curio looked around at the crew. Half of them were Primus's guards, the other half were hired from Noviomagus. Everyone seemed to be getting on with their jobs with surprising calmness.

Pavo came across from the other side of the boat.

"We're out of ballista range," he said. "But there are some archers following us on horseback."

“Let them try,” said the head bodyguard. Up ahead, the river opened up wide into the Oceanus Britannicus. In the distance, the isle of Vectis was rising up out of the mist. The ship had begun to hit the first ocean waves, and the prow was rising and falling rhythmically. They would soon be out to sea.

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66: NEGOTIATIONS

The massive army of Saxons had set up camp on the low hills to the north of Londinium. During the nights the people in the town could see the torches burning, and hear the war drums.

Halfway along the road between the camp and Londinium, a smaller camp had been set up. This was where the negotiations were taking place. Very few people were allowed into the camp, but Curio and Pavo were here, dressed in their best new clothes that Primus had bought for them. They watched from a safe distance as Primus and the Saxon leader Horza held their talks at the centre of the circle of tents.

Behind them, a wagon arrived, being driven by Trio, who waved at them happily. For his part as the diversion at the docks, Primus had been treating Trio with a great deal more respect and authority, and had put in some good words with him amongst the bishops. Curio ambled over to him as he dropped down from the driver’s seat.

“This is it?” asked Curio. “The chest of gold?”

“It is,” said Trio.

In the back was a squad of soldiers guarding the chest, and a small group of slaves, including Alba. They unloaded the chest off the wagon.

“That’s far enough,” said Trio. “The soldiers can take it from here.”

The soldiers hauled the trunk up onto their shoulders, and carried it towards the camp centre.

“So that’s that,” said Curio. “Duty done. Well guarded.”

“Thank you,” said Trio, who had been watching the gold night and day for the last few weeks, presumably to overcompensate for the last time.

“Oh, I wanted to ask, did we track down the other contents of the trunk? All my phalluses? For the plays?”

“Oh, er, yes!” said Trio, looking faintly guilty. “Yes indeed. Octa brought them back to Verulamium with him. Yes, I found them.”

“Brilliant! Where are they?”

“I’m sure they’re around,” said Trio uncomfortably. Curio decided not to push the matter.

Alba came over to his side, and he put an arm around her. He touched her belly, lightly and protectively. Curio looked down at it.

“So it’s true?” he asked. “The two of you are-?”

“We are,” said Trio. “Yes. She is. We are.”

Alba nodded.

“So that’s why she was so keen on you,” said Curio, grinning. “Does Primus know?”

“Not yet,” said Alba.

“I don’t want to be around when you tell him,” said Curio.

“Neither do we,” said Trio. Curio laughed. It was Trio’s first joke.

“Curio!” called Pavo. “It’s starting! Come quick!”

“Coming!” called Curio, and turned back to Trio and Alba. “Do you want to watch this? It’s in the making.”

“No thank you,” said Trio. “We’d better get out of here before Primus sees us.”

“Oh well, suit yourselves. See you later.”

He gave them a cheerful wave as they got back on the wagon, and hurried back to Pavo.

In the centre of the circle of tents, the negotiations between Primus and Horza seemed to have come to some kind of conclusion. Primus made a formal hand signal, and the soldiers carried Nasica’s chest forward and between the two leaders.

“This is it,” said Curio. “Politics. Thrilling.”

“I’m just here because if anything goes wrong I want to be the first to know,” said Pavo.

“Why?” said Curio.

“You see those nags?” said Pavo, pointed to the road, where a pair of Primus’s horses were tied to a post. “At the first sign of trouble I’m grabbing one of them and heading to meet your family in Isca Dumnoniarum.”

The soldiers lowered the chest, and respectfully backed away. Primus had the honour of offering the contents to the Saxon leader. He opened the chest slowly and ceremoniously.

Horza of the Saxons looked into it, dumbfounded.

“What is this?” he said. He reached in, and pulled out a big wooden penis.

“Oh no,” said Curio quietly.

“What is the meaning of this?” said the Saxon leader. He threw the codpiece onto the ground and took out another, and another. “This is an insult! An insult to the Saxons!”

“Did you do this?” said Curio to Pavo. But Pavo was already up, and running for the horses.

“The actors!” Primus was shouting. “Arrest the actors!”

And Curio knew what had happened.

Nicely done, lovebirds, he thought as he chased after Pavo. He allowed himself a grin. *You screwed us all completely, but nicely done.*

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University of Cape Town

EPILOGUE

University of Cape Town

67: THE END

Trio stood on the deck of a ship bound for Carthage, sailing south along the coast of Hispania. The winds had been good and there had been no sign of pirates. It had been a smooth journey so far. They were running out of some things, though.

The captain finished showing the deckhand how to tie the proper knot for the rigging, and turned to him.

“Yes, mister Felicianus? What can I do for you this time?”

“I, uh...” said Trio. “I was hoping you had some more olive oil.”

“More?”

“I have the payment.”

He held up a gold coin. The captain nodded.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll talk to the cook. But we’ll need to stop at the next port to restock.”

“All right.”

The captain went down to the galley, and came back with a small clay bottle.

“That’s the last of it,” he said. “Beats me what you need it all for. Your wife like to do her own cooking, does she?”

“Yes. Yes, she does.”

He went back down to the cabin, and tapped on the door.

“I got it,” he whispered.

Alba opened the door, and traded the bottle for a kiss.

“Well done,” she said.

He latched the door behind him.

“Let’s start with the top this time,” said Alba. She let her dress fall off one shoulder, and then the other. Even in the low light of the cabin her skin glowed white. She sat on the bed, and patted it. He came and sat next to her.

Alba pulled out the stopper. She poured some olive oil into Trio’s hands, and turned her back to him. He let his hands slide over her skin.

“Are you still thinking about the actors?” she said.

“Sometimes,” said Trio.

“They’ll be fine. They live charmed lives.”

“I’m worried about the gold, though. Without it, the Saxons-”

“Shhh,” she said. “Think about right here.”

Trio brought his hands together, and ran his fingers all the way down her back, along the sides of her spine. He could feel her muscles under his finger tips.

“Is it right that I’m being rewarded? For doing so wrong?” he said.

Alba turned to face him. He kept his fingers on her.

“Have you really been worse than everyone else?” she said. “Front.”

Trio massaged the front of her shoulders. He added more oil to his hands, and began working his way down. He felt the roundness where her belly was beginning to bulge, then brought them up a little higher. Alba tilted back her head, and closed her eyes. The touch of Alba under his hands made it hard for Trio to feel all that guilty.

There was still a long way to go before Carthage. There would be a lot of time to think, among other things. He would have time to work out all his many moral issues.

Until then, Alba was pushing down on his head.

“Lick my toes,” she said.