



CARBO AND THE THIEF
AND OTHER TALES OF
ANCIENT ROME

ALEX GOUGH

To family, friends and colleagues

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Carbo and the Thief

The legionary looked dead, Felix thought. In reality he was dead drunk, he knew. He had been watching him all evening, following him through the alleyways of Divodorum Mediomatricorum. The streets were full, legionaries on leave blowing their donatives, veterans spending their pensions, and local bartenders, hawkers and prostitutes willingly accepting their cash. Felix had eyes only for this one though.

It was only a few hours earlier, as the sun was descending, that Felix had been sitting beneath the aqueduct, hands outstretched, pleading for alms. There were so many beggars, some much more deserving than he. Amputee veterans, skinny mothers with emaciated babies, the elderly, the blind, the infirm. He knew many by name, many more by sight, liked a handful, hated more. When it came down to it though, each had to look after their own. Felix had a younger sister, Tullia, who was his sole responsibility. He wasn't quite sure how old she was, but he thought he had seen around ten summers, and Tullia a couple less. She was certainly too young to survive without him.

So Felix's daily existence was hand to mouth, subsistence achieved by begging, petty theft and the occasional coin from running an errand for a shopkeeper or porter. Surplus was rare, and was stored against the common situation where a day of toil left him empty-handed. Today was a day of surplus, two copper coins burning a hole in a hidden pocket inside his tunic. A rich young man, probably an equestrian, had given him a note to take to a certain house, with express instructions that it should be handed to the mistress of the house, and no one else.

It had taken some persuasion to get the porter to summon her, and when the pretty matron had arrived, she had looked down at him with contempt. She had taken the rolled note from him with reluctance and a wrinkled nose,

but her face lit up when she saw the seal. She tore the note open and beamed with delight as she read. Then she had bade the porter to tip him two asses and had wandered away distractedly into the house. The porter had passed over the two coppers coins, and sent him on his way, with the admonishment to tell no one about the message.

Felix was young, but he wasn't stupid. Life on the streets gave no shelter from exposure to suffering, violence or adult pleasures. Many was the time that Felix had sheltered with Tullia in a tomb, disused warehouse or temple portico, crammed in with strangers who shared every aspect of their lives. So he figured out that the married matron who resided in the sumptuous domus he had just visited was carrying out some illicit activity with the young nobleman he had acted as courier for. He filed it away in his mind for possible future use, although what use that could be, he wasn't sure. No one was likely to believe a street urchin with any allegations of wrong doing, and if the miscreants feared even doubt being sown, then they would have no problem in hiring someone to do away with him and dump his body in the Tiber. All in all, trouble like that was best avoided, and he would just enjoy the fortune that the two copper coins represented to him.

He had planned to spend the evening with Tullia, relieving Servilia, the old blind lady who kindly cared for her, from her baby sitting duties. They had sat beneath the aqueduct with palms out, three among a crowd of many, unsuccessfully importuning the passers by as the sun sank in the sky. When the alms for the old lady were low, Felix often contributed some of his own supplies to her, food or a coin. She was the exception to his rule of everyone looking after their own. He told himself it was not sentimentality, but the vital role she played in providing childcare for Tullia.

Then Felix met the legionary.

The soldier, tall and skinny with a scar on one cheek, had looked their way when Felix called out for pity. He had leaned over, laughed, and spat on Tullia. Tullia took the insult with equanimity, nothing new for her. The blind lady put a protective arm around the little girl. Felix bridled at the insult, though was powerless to attempt redress. But then he became transfixed by the bulla dangling on a chain from the soldier's neck.

The bulla was a common enough charm. Worn by male children to ward them against evil spirits, this soldier seemed to be attached enough to his to wear it as an adult. Many legionaries were understandably superstitious, so maybe this one felt it brought him luck, despite the obvious teasing wearing the childish symbol would bring him.

The bulla was in the shape of a winged penis with a bulbous tip, and looked like it was made of solid silver. So maybe it was more than just luck for which it was worn - it had value too. One of the wings was broken halfway down, and there was a notch in the shaft of the disproportionate phallus.

The legionary saw Felix staring at the charm, and put a hand to it protectively. He signed a curse towards them, and wandered away, a slight stagger in his stride suggesting that he had started the night's drinking early. Felix averted his eyes until the legionary was some distance away, then stared at the retreating back, mind whirling. He placed a hand on the blind lady's arm.

"Servilia, will you mind Tullia, for a bit longer for me, please?"

"Of course, dear," said Servilia.

"Where are you going, Felix?" asked Tullia, petulantly.

"I have ... something to do."

So Felix had followed the legionary from tavern to tavern, watching him get drunker and drunker as his purse got lighter and lighter. There was a short stay in a brothel, remarkably short, Felix had thought, having a rough idea of what was supposed to happen in there, and then the legionary in fouler temper had emerged and headed for another tavern and another drink.

By the time the moon had risen into the starred sky, the legionary was barely capable of standing. Felix watched from a distance, still unobtrusive, as the legionary slumped against a wall and then slid down it.

Now he watched the gentle rise and fall of the legionary's chest, indicating that the man was asleep, or had drunk himself unconscious, or some combination of the two. The time had come for Felix to act, but he hesitated. This wasn't an apple or loaf from the market, deserving of a striping from one of the vigiles. This was something of value, and if he was caught, he could expect to be punished with a long trip to the salt mines. Or a short one, if what he had heard about the life expectancy there was true. He looked around him. The street was momentarily deserted. The soldier snored. It was now or never. He tiptoed up to the recumbent figure, and gently picked up the bulla. It was attached by a copper chain, but he couldn't immediately see the fastener. He probed around the back of the legionary's neck, and he smiled as his fingers touched a hook.

The legionary's eyes opened, and he gripped Felix's wrist. Felix jumped backward with a cry, keeping his grasp on the bulla. The light chain broke and the charm came away in his hand, unbalancing him so he stumbled onto his backside. The legionary staggered to his feet, and Felix sat for a moment, frozen with terror. Then the soldier let out an enraged roar, and Felix jumped up and bolted down the street.

Unsteadily, the soldier gave chase. Felix was young and fast, but the soldier was a grown man, used to marching for hours every day with a heavy

pack on his back. So despite his impaired state, and the head-start that Felix had, the legionary was soon gaining on the young thief.

Felix ducked down a narrow side alley, hurdling sleeping dogs and beggars, weaving around citizens and soldiers. The cry of "Stop thief!" rang out behind him, too close. He turned another corner, and risked a glance back. As he did so, a large figure emerged from a tavern, and he ran headlong into a solid chest. He found himself dumped onto his backside for the second time in as many minutes, and stared up at a tall muscular figure, with charcoal hair and a military bearing, but wearing a civilian tunic.

"Watch where you are going, boy," growled the man.

Felix mumbled an apology as he rose, then heard the footsteps of the legionary. With no time to think, he pressed the bulla into the hand of the large man.

"I didn't steal it," he said, then fled.

The legionary arrived just in time to see the exchange. He watched the boy flee for a moment, then obviously decided it was more important to regain the charm. He stopped in front of the large man, putting his hands onto his knees and leaning forward while he regained his breath.

"Thank you," he gasped, holding out a hand. "Damn thief. If you would be so kind..."

The large man didn't move, and when the legionary had regained his wind, he straightened himself as best he could and looked the newcomer in the eye. The legionary was tall, so he was able to do this, but he saw now the extent of the man's bulk, muscular chest stretching his tunic, rough scarred skin covering meaty arms. The legionary's expression hardened.

"Hand it over," he said, trying not to slur. "Then we can both be about our business."

The large man was turning the bulla over in his hand thoughtfully. "The boy said he didn't steal it."

The legionary regarded him with surprise. "Well of course. Did you expect him to confess his crime?"

"I didn't expect him to discuss it at all. And certainly not to give it to me."

"It was his best chance of escape, to drop the thing he had stolen."

"To drop it, yes," said the man. "To give it to a stranger though..." He trailed off thoughtfully.

The legionary looked exasperated now. "Look, friend. The hour is late, and there are taverns and brothels in this blighted town that I still haven't visited."

"Don't let me detain you," said the man. "I think I will hang on to this trinket for the time being, though."

"That trinket belongs to me!" blurted the legionary.

"So you say," said the man. "But there appears to be more than one theory regarding its ownership."

At this, the legionary finally lost his barely restrained temper. He drew his gladius and brandished it at the man holding his charm.

"I don't know who you are, but give me back my property now, or this will end badly for you."

The man stepped inside the drunken legionary's reach so swiftly the soldier hardly saw him move. A twist at the wrist, and he was painfully disarmed. A punch to the bridge of the nose of unbelievable power, and the soldier was on his knees, clutching his face, blood spurting between his fingers.

The man looked down on him.

"I'm Gaius Valerius Carbo. Pilus prior of the 2nd cohort of the XIIIth Gemina.[check]" He turned and walked off, then remembered something and turned back. "Retired," he added.

Carbo woke with a piece of straw sticking in his ear. The mattress was torn, its stuffing spilling out onto the floor. He took a moment to orient himself, to remember he wasn't in his lodgings in the legion camp, but in a tavern several days journey south of legionary headquarters. He rolled his legs out of bed and sat up, stretched, wincing as the poorly healed wound on his leg complained. There was a bowl of water on the table and he splashed some on his face, rubbing away the sleep. He blinked a few times, and his gaze came to rest on the winged penis charm that sat next to the bowl, where he had left it before retiring the previous night.

A hammering came at the door. He picked up the bulla and dropped it into the purse that contained his most valued treasures - his coins and gems, painstakingly gathered over twenty five years of service. He glanced around the room, making sure his gladius was in easy reach, then opened the door.

Two grim-faced legionaries stood there, in full dress uniform. The older, a short, stout fellow who looked near to retirement, hung back, letting the younger one, who seemed to be the century's optio, do the talking.

"Gaius Valerius Carbo?"

Carbo nodded.

"You are to come with us."

Carbo gave a half smile. "I'm retired. I am no longer at the whim of your commander."

"This isn't about orders, Carbo. Not yours anyway. You have been accused of theft. You are to come and see our centurion, Balbus, who will decide on whether there is a case to answer."

"Theft? That doesn't concern the legions."

"It does when it was a legionary that was the victim."

Carbo sighed. Just a few days into his retirement, looking forward to peace and calm. His own fault, he supposed, for getting involved. But something about that boy had reminded Carbo of his young self, getting into trouble on the streets of Rome. Besides, there was something curious about the situation.

"I think I need to make some enquiries. Can you tell your centurion I will attend him before sundown?"

The two legionaries exchanged glances, and loosened their gladii pointedly.

"I don't think you understand. Our orders are to take you to see our centurion, now."

Carbo stepped forward, so his face was up close to the optio, and barked, "No, soldier. You don't understand. I am Gaius Valerius Carbo, recently pilus prior of the XIIIth Gemina [check] and I am telling you I have things to do. Now unless you want to things to get messy, I suggest you do as you are told, and take my message to your centurion."

The tone of command in Carbo's voice almost had the desired effect in the optio, yet his sense of duty obviously held him back from instant obedience.

"But, sir, my orders..."

The older legionary was tugging at the optio's tunic.

"Sir," he said quietly. "There was a Carbo. I think in the XIIIth. The one who survived the Varian disaster."

The optio looked at his comrade, then back to Carbo, shock and admiration on his face.

"You're *that* Carbo?"

Carbo's face was impassive. The young optio flushed.

"Well, ahem, in that case, in the circumstances, all things considered, um, attending the centurion's summons by sundown will, I'm sure be quite acceptable."

Carbo inclined his head, then waited. The optio shuffled his feet for a moment, then gave an uncertain salute, and turned, the older legionary in his wake. Carbo smiled, closed the door after them, then turned and fished the bulla out of his purse. He regarded it for a while. The piece was obviously old, with a multitude of nicks and scars over its surface, as well as the broken wing and the gouge in the shaft. Looking past that, though, it was clear even to the untrained eye that the workmanship was good, and the metal seemed to be unadulterated silver. Still, was it really just about the monetary value? For the legionary, it likely had worth for luck in battle, or elsewhere in life, but for the boy? If it was just about the money, why give it away so readily? And why proclaim he wasn't a thief, when superficially the evidence was all to the contrary.

Carbo slid the bulla back into his purse, and headed for the door. There was only one person who could answer these questions. But how easy would he be to find?

As Carbo wandered through the poorest and roughest parts of the town, he re-examined his motives. If he was completely honest with himself, the main reason he found himself searching the dregs of the town's populace, looking for a beggar and probable thief, was obstinacy. He didn't like demands being made on him, even by his superiors in the army. It was an instinct he had had to curb to rise to the position he had achieved, but orders still had a tendency to grate with him. When they were given to him by a mere

legionary, and a drunken disrespectful one at that, there was no chance he was going to acquiesce.

It wasn't just his stubbornness though. Something about the boy's actions, and this bulla, had piqued his interest. And, he had to admit to himself, there was something about the boy, even from their brief meeting, that had reminded him of his younger self, hustling and fighting to survive on the merciless streets of Rome.

So he continued the search as the sun rose higher, the summer heat starting to become uncomfortable. He looked under arches, in tombs, on the steps of temples and the entrances to the baths, everywhere that the destitute and hopeless loitered, begging, sheltering, or for some, just waiting to die. As the sun reached its zenith, he started to flag, and found a table outside a run down tavern.

The tavern keeper, seeing a reasonably well-dressed man with a military bearing, hastened to serve him. He ordered some bread and garum, and some well watered mulsum. He sat back and looked around him. The tavern was opposite the aqueduct, a place whose great arches provided shelter for a lot of the town's poor, and therefore a reasonable place to keep watch. He tried to picture the boy in his mind's eye. It had been a brief encounter, and dark, but there had been a long moment where their eyes had met, and Carbo tried to keep that image to the fore.

He scanned the beggars and impoverished citizens, using one hand to shade out the sun from his eyes. He saw an elderly veteran, single-armed, laughing and playing dice with a comrade whose handicap was not so obvious. Near to them was a young boy, sitting alone, weeping into his hands. Younger than the boy he had encountered last night, Carbo thought, so his gaze swept on. There was an elderly lady, eyes clouded with cataracts, and cuddled against her was a young girl. Both looked reasonably well fed, or at

least better than many of their neighbours, which given their respective ages, and the old lady's disability, suggested someone was looking after them.

The tavernkeeper returned with his food and wine. The garum was of poor quality, and the wine so sour he suspected it was mainly vinegar, but he had tasted worse on many occasions during his time with the legions. He handed over a coin which was half the value the tavernkeeper asked for, but the beginnings of protestation were silenced by a look from Carbo.

Carbo took the bulla from his pouch and turned it over in his hands again. It was definitely old, which maybe implied it had been passed down within a family over many years, rather than bought new for a child more recently. He sipped his wine, grimaced and looked over at the old lady and the young girl. There was a smallish figure with them now, back to Carbo, talking to them earnestly. Carbo squinted, trying to make out some detail that the bright sun was hiding. The little girl noticed Carbo's attention and said something to the newcomer. The figure turned, and Carbo found himself looking into the face of a young boy.

For a moment, he was unsure. It had been night, now it was noon, he had only seen him for a moment, was it definitely the same boy? Then the boy looked at the bulla in Carbo's hands, and his eyes widened. He looked up at Carbo, and Carbo recognised the face of the young beggar-thief, just as recognition likewise dawned on the boy.

The boy turned tail and set off like a hare down the narrow streets. Carbo cursed and jumped to his feet, upsetting his garum and wine over the table. He ran after the boy, gritting his teeth and trying to ignore the pain in his leg from his poorly healed injury.

The chase was evenly matched. Carbo was a fit soldier, freshly discharged and still at his peak. He was large, and the crowds parted for him rather than get rammed out of the way by this charging bull. But his leg

slowed him, and further the boy was small and could dart between the townsfolk with agility. He clearly knew the area too, so Carbo had to be careful to keep him in sight or lose him completely.

The boy dodged down a narrow alley, and Carbo followed, nearly tripping over a sleeping dog, and kicking a chicken with rose into the air with a squawk and a flurry of feathers. As he rounded the corner, he caught a glimpse of the boy dodging down another turning. He accelerated, but found himself starting to pant in the heat. Carbo was a big, strong, fit man, but his bulk made him suited to short bursts, not prolonged athletic activity. He knew that he would have to end this race soon.

The boy zigged and zagged down two more alleys, and Carbo recognised the narrow streets from his previous wanderings. Ahead, the road would turn right, then sharply right again, wending around an inconveniently placed dwelling that the town planners had obviously lacked the power or will to demolish. Instead of following, Carbo turned to the house on his right, and rushed at it, his shoulder impacting the wooden door and shattering it. He burst through into the living quarters of a large family, who greeted his dramatic entrance with a range of screams, from the shrill of the youngest child, through the piercing shriek of the mother, to the baritone yelp of the grandfather. Carbo hurdled a cot with a baby, his trailing foot catching it just enough to start it rocking gently, then he was through and into the next room, which served as the shop of the stola maker who lived here and supported his family.

Carbo carried on through, ignoring the outraged cry of the shopkeeper, flailing through several dresses that hung from hooks in the ceiling, collecting two around his chest and shoulders as he exited through the shop frontage. The boy was just racing past, and he looked with horror and astonishment at

the unexpected appearance of the bulky figure inexplicably suddenly dressed in women's clothes.

Carbo leapt, both arms out, and closed the boy in a tight hug as they both fell to the ground. The boy wriggled like a fish, but Carbo hung on tight, and eventually the resistance went out of him. Carbo clambered painfully to his feet, keeping a firm grip on the boy's arm.

"First of all," said Carbo, still out of breath. "What's your name?"

"Felix," said Felix, sullenly.

"Good," said Carbo. "I'm Carbo. Now, secondly." Carbo held up the bulla. "What did you mean when you said you didn't steal this?"

Felix hesitated, then appeared to decide he had nothing to lose. His words came out in a rush, and Carbo listened attentively.

Carbo entered the centurion's quarters just before sundown, escorted by the optio and legionary that had knocked on his door that morning. They seemed uncertain what sort of reaction they would get from the centurion - praise that they had finally brought him as commanded, or a rebuke that it had taken all day. The centurion, though, simply waved them away wordlessly. He looked at Carbo for a moment, then saluted him with respect. Carbo returned the salute with equal respect, acknowledging someone like him, the common soldier who had worked his way to a position of responsibility.

"Gaius Valerius Carbo," said the centurion. "I am Gnaeus Lucretius Balbus. It's an honour to meet you."

"The honour is mine," said Carbo, magnanimously. Balbus indicated the other figure in the room with a nod of his head.

"This man in my command, Septimus, has brought a grievance against you to my attention. Septimus, elaborate please."

The legionary that Carbo had encountered the night before looked like he had been straining at a leash, and was now released.

"This man," he blustered, his voice somewhat nasal, "is in receipt of stolen goods. A bulla that belonged to me."

"A bulla?" asked Balbus. "Like children wear?"

Septimus was momentarily taken aback. "Well, yes. But a valuable one at that. And it is my lucky charm. Seven years in the legions and not a scratch on me. Until last night that is, when this man broke my nose."

Balbus sighed. "Is this true, Carbo?"

"That I broke his nose? Certainly. Your legionary threatened me with his sword. That I disarmed him with out killing him felt like considerable restraint on my part. As for whether the bulla is his lucky charm, I'm afraid I really couldn't comment."

"But you do admit you received it?" said Septimus, eagerly.

"Yes," said Carbo. "It was passed to me. But I no longer have it."

Septimus stared at him in disbelief.

"Then who does, Carbo?" asked Balbus.

"If another might be permitted into your presence, centurion?" asked Carbo.

Balbus inclined his head resignedly. Carbo motioned to one of the guards at the door, who gestured to another to enter.

Felix strode in, cocky demeanour masking what Carbo knew would be a racing heart and churning stomach. Carbo breathed a sigh of relief. Giving the bulla back to Felix had been a risk, especially when he was asking him to confront to authority he habitually avoided. But Carbo had put himself in the boy's place, and guessed how a young Carbo would have behaved. He was pleased that his faith had been well placed.

"Centurion Balbus, may I introduce the young man currently in possession of the disputed bulla."

"That's him," cried Septimus. "That's the little thief that stole my charm!" He moved to accost the boy, who flinched, but Carbo interposed himself between them and Balbus held up a warning hand.

"Carbo, please explain, and make it quick. I have the utmost respect for your record, so I am indulging you, but you are now a civilian, and I am a busy man."

Carbo nodded to Felix. "Tell the centurion what you told me."

Felix swallowed, then spoke up in a confident sounding voice.

"The bulla belongs to me."

"That's absurd," blustered Septimus. "He can't deny that he took it from round my neck last night."

Felix looked steadfastly at the centurion. "No, sir, I don't deny that. But still, the bulla belongs to me. This man took it from me, I think maybe five years ago."

Septimus stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Explain," said Balbus.

"Sir, my mother raised my sister Tullia and myself as good citizens. She worked hard to keep us in food and clothing and shelter. When we were younger, we sometimes had money from our father to help us, but his visits and his money became less and less frequent as time went by.

"The bulla was mine. It had been passed down to me from my mother's father, and though I knew it was valuable, it was always more important to me as a family heirloom. It was my only treasure, and I knew every flaw and every nick on its surface. But it disappeared, on the day of my father's last visit.

"It had been nearly a year since we had last seen him, and he came to our dwelling, drunk and poor, insisting my mother gave him what coin she had earned. When he realised how little we had, he took my bulla. My cries and pleas he ignored. The day I lost my treasure is in my mind as clear as if it were yesterday."

Balbus looked at Felix, head tilted to one side, an eyebrow raised. Septimus stared at Felix, colour draining from his face.

"My mother died I think two winters ago, and ever since I have been fending for myself and my little sister. But I never forgot the father who left me, or the bulla he took. I had never thought to see either again, until yesterday. As I was begging, I saw the bulla, and I knew it straight away. It was only then that I recognised my father."

Septimus looked like he was finding it hard to breathe.

"F...Felix?" he managed to gasp.

"Yes, father," said Felix.

Septimus dropped to his knees, and tears started to roll down his face.

"Felix, I'm so sorry. I meant to... I just... the legions." He could find no more words. Felix regarded him dispassionately.

Carbo turned to Balbus.

"I think there is no doubt the bulla belongs to the boy, don't you agree?"

Balbus nodded. "No doubt at all. And what should we do about these two?"

Carbo raised his eyebrows. "Do? It's none of our business, centurion. Purely a family matter from here I would say."

Septimus was looking up at Felix, his eyes pleading forgiveness. Felix looked down on him with contempt and overt suspicion.

"You are quite correct," said Balbus. "Septimus, you are dismissed. Take your son with you, and see if there is anything you can do to make amends for your misdeeds."

Septimus rose, and with Felix, left the centurion's quarters. Felix gave a backward glance to Carbo as he went, gratitude in his expression, and Carbo gave him a wink.

Balbus sighed. "I don't think I have anything so pressing that it couldn't wait till tomorrow. Carbo, would you care to join me for a drink? I've heard a lot of stories about you, and I would like to hear from the horse's mouth how many are true."

Carbo smiled. "All lies, I'm sure. But yes, I would love to take a drink with you."

The centurion rose, and the two military men left the building together, to find a convenient place to sit and drink, and swap tales of battles and superiors and tight scrapes and tavern brawls. Carbo thought he was going to enjoy retirement.

Carbo and the Gladiator

The streets of Vienne were packed when Carbo entered the town. He was irritated. He had walked far that day under a hot sun blazing out of a cloudless sky, and just wanted to find a tavern for food, drink and a seat to rest his backside on. He was surprised that the place was this busy. He had been told that Vienne was a complete latrine of a town, full of ugly women, corrupt merchants and ruthless criminals. This had, however, been relayed to him by a tavern keeper of the Aedui, one of the Gallic tribes further north. Vienne was a settlement of the Allobroges, a tribe that had supported Caesar in his Gallic conquests. Carbo suspected that his Aeduin source had a somewhat jaundiced opinion of his southerly neighbours.

The town itself seemed pleasant enough. Carbo had spotted a theatre, the markets and shops looked to have a variety of fresh produce, and the women were anything but ugly. Still, for the town to be this crowded was unexpected. The reason was soon obvious when Carbo saw a sign painted in big bright letters on a prominent wall.

“The gladiatorial troupe of the aedile, T. Salonius Avitus will fight tomorrow in Vienne. There will be a big animal hunt. Antiochus will fight Diomedes. Awnings will be provided.”

Carbo smiled. It was the first good news of the day, a nice sporting event to break up his long journey back to Rome. He found his way to a tavern that looked slightly less crowded than the rest, and used his bulk to force his way in. Despite protests from those already crammed into the small room, he eased his way to the tavernkeeper and bought a large cup of well-watered wine and some bread and cheese. Finding somewhere to sit was impossible without starting a fight however, and as a brawl would mean at least evens

that he would spill his wine, he decided not to force the issue. He went back into the street and sat with his back against a shop wall, stretching his aching legs out. He drained his cup, then ate hungrily.

When the small meal was gone, he looked around. The crowd was of varied make up - rich nobles, local town dwellers and many farmers and labourers who had been drawn in for the upcoming spectacle. Carbo presumed the aedile on the poster, Avitus, was up for re-election and was buying votes. It wasn't long before his wandering gaze found a piece of graffiti exhorting the reader to "Vote Avitus for Praetor again." Underneath was another piece of graffiti stating baldly, "Avitus fucks goats."

A small detachment of legionaries marched past. Carbo regarded them with mixed feelings. The wound in his leg throbbed, and Carbo felt old, especially after the day's long walk. But he thought fondly of the comrades he had left behind, the men he counted as his friends and his family. His mind drifted to his mother in Rome. He hoped she was well, it had been a little while since he had heard from her.

"Don't tell me you miss all that," came a voice from a man standing over Carbo. Carbo turned from the legionaries and squinted up into the sun to try to make out the face of the speaker. The man extended his hand, and Carbo took it and allowed himself to be helped to his feet. The man grunted. "Not lost any weight then."

Carbo looked down at his body. He knew he was tall, well-muscled, with not a pound of excess fat. He looked back at the man.

"Screw you, Barbatus. You're looking a bit chubby round the middle there yourself."

Barbatus grinned.

"Carbo, it's good to see you. What are you doing here?"

"I'm retired now. You too, I presume?"

Carbo nodded confirmation. "Got my plot of land," he said. "And some ill-gotten gains to tide me through my dotage, and I'm heading to Rome for a life of peace. You live here?"

"Been here since my discharge, what, ten years ago now. Come on, let me buy you a drink and we can catch up."

Barbatus was nearly as tall as Carbo, and nearly as bulky, but Carbo had been right, Barbatus' girth around his middle now significantly exceeded his chest size. In making their way through the crowds though, bulk was all that counted, whether it was muscle or fat, and Barbatus pushed his way through the crowded tavern, and returned shortly afterwards with two large cups of wine. He gave one to Carbo, who sipped it, noting that it was much stronger than the cup he had bought for himself. They looked around for a table or a bench, but every horizontal surface seemed occupied, so they stood in the street and let the crowds flow around them as they talked.

"What made you settle in this place, then?" asked Carbo.

"A woman," said Barbatus, making a face.

"Special one, I take it."

"Well, yeah, she is," Barbatus admitted reluctantly. "I thought she was out of my league, that she only wanted me for my money. But she has stuck around, even now when my pension is all but gone."

"Times hard?" asked Carbo.

Barbatus looked like he was about to say something, then thought better of it.

"We'll get by," he said, not looking like he believed it.

Carbo sipped his drink, and regarded him steadily. Barbatus held his gaze briefly then looked down.

"You were a senior centurion," said Carbo. "Savings from salary, loot, requisitioning a reasonable percentage of the quartermaster's supplies for

onward distribution, taking your cut from the gambling clubs to turn a blind eye. We all did it. Then your land and pension. You shouldn't have to worry about money. What happened?"

Barbatus looked weary. "Does it matter? What's done is done."

"Of course it matters. But you don't have to tell me, if you don't want to."

Barbatus thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Well if I can't tell an old comrade, who can I tell?" He took a breath, seeming to steel himself, then said in a low voice, "We had a child."

Carbo didn't miss the use of past tense, and put a sympathetic hand on Barbatus' shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Barbatus nodded. "Barbata was fit and well for seven years. Not a day of ill health, not even the pox. She could hold her own in a fight with the local boys, that's how fit she was. Then one day, we noticed she was starting to lose weight. We couldn't understand it, she was eating well, eating us out of house and home in fact. Then she started drinking more, and the weight loss carried on."

"We consulted the local quack, and he gave us some potion. Lizard's eye plucked while it was alive mashed up in partridge blood. Or something like that. Cost a small fortune, but nothing we couldn't afford, or wouldn't part with in a heart beat for her. Did no good at all though. The quack gave us a magic amulet with a prayer to Asclepius engraved on it. No help. We went to the priests, and in exchange for donations to their temples, they prayed for her, offered sacrifices, to Jupiter, Juno, Venus, Isis, Fortuna, Iaso, Panacea. We prayed to fucking Pomona, goddess of the orchards if we thought it would help. She started to get weak."

Barbatus' voice caught, and he took a sip of his drink. Carbo waited, letting him take his time.

“Then we heard of this new quack in town, a Greek called Demeter. Rumour was he could cure anything. We searched him out, begged him to help us. He refused, said he was too busy, that he was too expensive for the likes of us. We begged harder, offered him more gold. He eventually relented, and came to look at Barbata.

“By this time she was bed bound. She was skin and bones, but she had lost her ravenous appetite by now, though she still drank and pissed and drank and pissed like she had been eating salt. This Demeter looked at her, examined her tongue, felt her pulse, smelled her breath, even tasted her piss. He declared she had what he called the sweet sickness. We asked if he could cure it. He shook his head and said no.

“We urged him to try anything, and he hesitated and then said there was a cure, a fabulously rare and incredibly expensive orchid that was guaranteed to make her better, but he didn’t know if he could get it, or whether we could afford it. He named a price that was everything we had, including our land. It left us with just our apartment to our name, but we didn’t hesitate and agreed. He left us and said he would return if he could, and we should have the money ready.

“We watched our little girl fading away before our eyes. She was so brave, made us so proud.” Barbatus wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and took a breath.

“After two days, Demeter returned. Barbata had slipped into unconsciousness by then. She breathed but no longer ate. Her breath had this strange sweet smell on it. But Demeter had a smile on his face. He showed us this flower, a small white thing with yellow petals. I wonder now how we could have put so much faith in such a thing, but we handed him all our gold, and he set to work, crushing the flower in his pestle and mortar, adding drops of other potions, chanting incantations. Eventually it was ready,

and he tipped the tiny potion into her mouth. She swallowed, but didn't stir herself. He just nodded and looked satisfied. He embraced me, and told me that by tomorrow this would all be over. Then he left."

Carbo grimaced, knowing how the story must end. "And he was right?"

Barbatus nodded. "She was dead by the morning. I went looking for him, but the slippery Greek bastard had left town, along with everything we owned. We could barely scratch enough together to bury her properly. So for the past year, I've been making a living where I can, bodyguarding, labouring, even begging sometimes. My wife sometimes comes home with money, and the look she gives me tells me I'm not to ask where it came from."

Carbo hesitated. "Listen Barbatus. I've done alright for myself. I've got land and money. I'm taking most of it home for my mother, and to set myself up for an easy retirement. But there is spare there, I could..."

Barbatus held up a hand. "Don't you dare. I didn't tell you all that to get your charity." He prodded a finger into Carbo's chest. "I was a senior centurion, so don't you fucking patronise me." He looked down.

"I'm sorry," said Carbo, "I didn't mean..." He trailed off.

"I'm sorry, too," said Barbatus. "It was a kind offer and well meant. But I still have my pride. I just wanted you to...understand. I didn't gamble or drink my pension away. It was cheated from me, in the cruellest way."

Carbo placed an arm around Barbatus' shoulders. "Let me at least buy the next round."

Barbatus grasped Carbo's forearm and gave him a sad smile. "I can let you do that," he agreed.

"Antiochus, Antiochus, Antiochus," chanted the crowd in the tavern. The huge gladiator stood on a table, a large mug of beer in one hand. He lifted it in the air, and then with a roar from the crowd, upended it into his gullet. The

beer went down like it had been poured into a drain. He threw the mug into the onlookers, and yelled for another. It was supplied to him within seconds, and seconds later that one had vanished too.

Carbo was at the back of the tavern, relying on the wall for support as his head spun a little. One more drink with Barbatus had turned into several, and day had turned to night as they reminisced on old battles, nights on the town, the reprobates they had served with.

“So you’re telling me,” said Carbo, words slurring only a little. “You’re telling me that tomorrow that guy is going to fight at the top of the bill.”

“’S right,” said Barbatus, a little further gone than Carbo.

“But he’s completely pissed,” said Carbo.

“That’s like the Greek calling the Egyptian a cocksucker.”

Carbo smiled. “But I’m not fighting tomorrow. Think back, would we have got drunk before a battle? Allowed our men to?”

“No,” conceded Barbatus. “But this is the arena. It’s a show, a performance. It will last as long as Antiochus wants to draw it out. But he won’t have to fight all day long in the heat, or the rain, or the cold, then sleep standing up and do it all over again the next day. ’S just pretend.”

“Men still end up dead.”

“Not often. Too valuable a commod... commodity...thing.”

Standing next to the table on which the gladiator stood was a short, pot-bellied man with skinny legs and a sunken chest. Carbo mused that he looked like an egg on a pair of sticks. He was tapping Antiochus on the leg, trying to get his attention, as the big man upended yet another mug of beer.

“Antiochus,” he said in a pleading voice. “It’s time to rest now. You must be fit for the fight tomorrow.”

“I could take down that Diomedes prick even if I was so drunk I couldn’t walk,” roared Antiochus.

The crowd cheered its approval and raised their cups to him.

“Is Diomedes that bad?” asked Carbo.

“No one really knows,” said Barbatus. “He is new to the area. But Antiochus has never been beaten, in over a hundred fights. The betting on him is heavy, even though the odds make it hardly worth it. Blandinus the bookmaker must be having a sleepless night.”

Carbo looked impressed. “Good record. Though I still bet he wouldn’t last two minutes in a battle facing a berserk German.”

Barbatus smiled, but shook his head. “I disagree. The man is unbeatable, unstoppable. Nothing can take him down.”

At which point, Antiochus collapsed.

Most of the crowd had drifted away by the time the gladiator’s medics had carried the huge man off. Carbo looked at him as he passed, noting the drool from the corner of his mouth, the way one side of his face hung slack, the arm and leg on one side of the body limp.

“A stroke,” commented Carbo.

“Huh?” said Barbatus.

“Remember that old tribune, fat chap, always eating and drinking heavily. Out of the blue, suddenly paralysed down one side. He lived for a short while afterwards I think. The medics called it a stroke.”

Barbatus nodded. “I remember. Poor chap. Well, that’s bugged up tomorrow’s entertainment.”

The skinny-legged pot-bellied man was sitting on the table in the middle of the tavern, gripping his hair and shaking his head. Carbo nudged Barbatus and pointed.

“Antiochus’ lanista, do you think?”

Barbatus looked over. "Yes, that's Mero. He will have had a lot of money tied up in Antiochus. Probably bet heavily on him too."

"Won't the bets be voided now?"

"I doubt it. The bookmakers aren't fond of giving back cash, even when someone has won. I guess Mero could take them to court, but given the wealth and the thugs at the bookies' beck and call, I suspect no court would argue against them."

Mero was wailing. "Ruined," he moaned. "Ruined. Damn that stupid oaf. I hope Cerberus chews his balls for eternity." He looked up, and at that moment saw Carbo looking at him. He got unsteadily to his feet and approached the big veteran.

"You," he said, looking up at Carbo. "Can you fight?"

Carbo looked down at him with a patronising smile. "Yes, I can fight."

"Fight for me tomorrow."

Carbo laughed and shook his head. "I'm retired."

"It will be a walk over. Diomedes is nothing. I just need someone who can hold a sword and look the part, someone big and hard looking. You will do."

"I can't really imagine why I would."

"I will reward you handsomely. This is the biggest fight for ages round here. People have flocked from miles around."

"I have money. And I've finished with fighting." Carbo looked over to Barbatus. "I'm tired."

"Will you stay with us tonight?" asked Barbatus. Carbo shook his head. "No, I won't meet your wife for the first time drunk and stinking of the road. I'll find a tavern bed."

"Are you staying in town for a while?"

"Another day or two maybe. I'll stay for the show, assuming it happens. Maybe I'll see you there."

Barbatus nodded and looked thoughtful.

“Are you coming?”

“No, I think I’ll stay a bit longer.”

Carbo clapped him on the shoulder. “It was good to see you again.” He made his exit, leaving his old comrade standing with the morose lanista.

Finding a bed was challenging, and Carbo found himself wishing he had taken up Barbatus’ offer. Eventually he was offered a sodden mattress in the corner of a dormitory with half a dozen other men or women packed in. The price was extortionate, but the tavern keeper wasn’t stupid, he knew the laws of supply and demand, and demand that night greatly outstripped supply.

Carbo lay, trying to get comfortable. Things crawled in the straw mattress, his room mates for the night tossed and turned and snored and one even vomited. Carbo himself squeezed his eyes tight, willing the world to stop spinning around him, and fighting down the nausea that accompanied the sensation. Soon he drifted off to sleep.

He woke with a start and a cry. His dream had been vivid, and he shuddered, cupping one hand between his legs to make sure that his precious possessions were still attached to his body. He was relieved to find that, unlike in the dream, they were.

Orange light through the window showed that it was only just dawn, and some of the occupants of the dormitory cursed him for waking them so early. Carbo stretched and rose, searching for something to drink that would quench his thirst and rid him of the foul taste in his mouth.

He spent the morning idling and recuperating. The town was quiet at first, but as the previous night’s revellers roused themselves, breakfasted and took whichever hangover cures they favoured, the streets and markets began to

fill. Carbo installed himself at a table outside a tavern to watch the world go by. He wondered where Barbatus lived. He should have taken some directions, or arranged a meet up when they were together last night. In an army camp, everyone had a place, and everyone knew each other, so it was no problem to locate someone. In this city, Carbo now realised, it would be hopeless trying to track his old comrade down. Still, he knew Barbatus was going to the spectacle later on, so he resolved to look out for him there. It would be nice to see him again, before he moved on.

Two men sat at his table, and nodded to him in brief greeting before starting their own conversation. Carbo half-listened to complaints about bossy wives and lazy slaves. His day-dreaming was interrupted when they turned to the subject of the fight that evening.

“Stupid bastard drunk himself to death, apparently. That’s really ruined the whole thing tonight.”

“No, I heard they got a replacement.”

“Really? That’s very short notice. I thought the lanista was a bit light on reserves, that’s why they got Diomedes in from outside the city.”

“Well, he found someone apparently.”

“Bet they aren’t up to much. Still it might be a better event than if Antiochus had fought. Diomedes is a complete no-hoper apparently, Antiochus would have demolished him.”

“The new guy knows his way around a sword, I’ve heard. It sounds like that is all that will be needed to take out Diomedes. No need to change your bet!”

The man laughed, and the conversation moved on. Carbo finished his drink, and moved on.

Carbo spent the rest of the day sightseeing. Not that there was much to see. The Temple of Augustus and Livia was moderately impressive, a large rectangular building with Corinthian columns, recently built and still undergoing modifications. Apart from that it was the theatre, shops, markets stalls and a small bathhouse. He paid for entrance to the baths and for a slave in the apodyterium to guard his belongings, then went for a plunge in the frigidarium. The bracing cold took his breath, and he quickly moved through to the tepidarium to warm up. After that, a short spell in the boiling hot caldarium, and he was ready for a rub down with olive oil in the unctorium. The masseur was skilled and gentle, avoiding his poorly healed war wounds. Carbo soon found himself drifting off to sleep under the strong fingers.

He wasn't sure how much time had elapsed when he awoke. The masseur was politely indicating that he had other customers waiting, so Carbo smiled his thanks, and returned to the apodyterium to reclaim his clothes and purse. He walked out into the streets and saw that the sun was low in the sky. The preliminaries of the show would likely be underway, and the crowds no longer flowed randomly, but predominantly in a single direction. He followed until he arrived at the Forum, in which rickety-looking sloping wooden stands had been erected.

Carbo joined the long queue, and waited patiently until he gained entry. There was no entrance fee, but all the best seats near the front fence that separated the arena from the crowds were gone. He spotted a gap on a bench about half way up the seating area, and squeezed in, his bulk eliciting grumbles from the people whose toes he trod on and noses he elbowed. He settled down into the tight space, ignoring the muttering from the people behind whose view he now blocked. The man to his left smiled at him.

“They found a replacement for old Antiochus then, I hear.”

Carbo looked over to him. He judged his neighbour to be in his fifties, broken veins on his cheek bones showing above a white streaked beard.

“Apparently so,” agreed Carbo.

“Got to get through all the rubbish before the big event though.”

The rubbish proved to be a troupe of jugglers and acrobats and the execution of an elderly escaped slave who had obviously been so badly beaten since his recapture that he was stuporous. When the executioner slid the sword into his chest from behind his collar bone, he barely reacted, just toppling forward with a disappointing trickle of blood. The promised big animal hunt involved two hunters with spears trying to goad an emaciated and lame boar into some display of aggression, and by the time it was dispatched the crowd were distinctly fed up. The hunters departed with a hail of rotten fruit and vegetables accompanying them.

Carbo looked around him as he waited for the final act to start, seeing if he could catch sight of Barbatus in the crowd. It was hopeless, the crowd was too big and tightly packed. His attention was drawn back to the centre of the sand by the announcer.

In an impressively loud and sonorous voice, the announcer cried, “Aaaaand now, the main event. Please welcome the challenger, Diomedes the murmillo!”

A skinny man slunk out of the shadows by the entrance and made his way to the centre of the arena. He didn’t salute or acknowledge the crowd, which was booing him from the moment he appeared. Carbo appraised him with a soldier’s eye. He wasn’t tall, and had little muscle to him. He held himself with a certain arrogance though, and something about his demeanour made Carbo think he was deserving of more respect than the crowd were giving him.

“Now, as many of you know, Antiochus was struck down by the gods last night.”

The booing intensified, and the announcer raised his voice further.

“But we have a replacement. A true Roman hero, resident of Vienne, veteran of the legions, has stepped into the breach. Appearing in the arena for the first time, but no slouch in a fight, please welcome Barbatus the Thracian!”

The crowd went wild as Barbatus strode out into the centre. Carbo’s jaw dropped. What was the idiot playing at?

Barbatus wore the distinctive brimmed, crested helmet, with a griffin emblem sported by all Thracians. He carried a small, square wooden shield and a sica, a short curved sword. He wore an armguard on his sword arm, and thick padded greaves to protect his legs. He saluted the crowd with his sword, smiling and clearly enjoying the attention.

Carbo clenched his jaw. Although he had boasted last night that Antiochus would not survive against a berserker German, the converse might also hold. A soldier trained to fight with the comrade on his left covering him with his shield, in tightly packed ranks, would not necessarily find it easy to adapt to the free, open style of fighting in the arena. Still, this Diomedes did look like a make-weight for the fight with his slight build. The murmillo was dressed in a similar fashion to the Thracian, but he lacked the leg greaves, compensating for this with a larger shield, and he fought with a gladius.

The older man next to Carbo was leaning forward, squinting and peering at the two gladiators. Barbatus and Diomedes saluted the front row where the decurions who made up the town council were seated. The announcer gave the signal for the fight to begin, and the two gladiators closed.

Carbo watched, heart thudding in his chest, as the combatants circled each other warily. He was pleased to see that Barbatus was not being over-

confident and rushing in, choosing instead to size up his opponent. He gave a short feint, and Diomedes danced backwards nimbly. Barbatus followed him, moving slowly, watching closely. Carbo knew that the helmets they both wore, which obscured the face, made it hard to predict the enemy's moves by his eye movements and facial expressions, but Barbatus had fought against helmeted foes before, and was adept at reading the language of the whole body.

Carbo's neighbour tapped him on the shoulder.

"Your eyes are younger than mine, son," he said. "Does that Diomedes have a tattoo of a snake on his back?"

Carbo suppressed his irritation at the interruption and looked. Yes, as the two fighters circled each other, and Diomedes' back came into view, he could make out a tattoo of a large snake, curled and poised to strike.

At that moment, Barbatus leapt forward, swinging his sica in a wide arc towards Diomedes' neck. Diomedes ducked one shoulder, holding up his shield so the blow glanced away harmlessly. His counter-strike was stunning in its speed, sweeping his gladius upwards in a diagonal stroke. Barbatus leapt back, but was too slow to prevent the tip of Diomedes sword opening up a superficial wound across his belly.

"That's not Diomedes," said Carbo's neighbour.

Stunned by the rapidity of Diomedes' attack, Carbo didn't register at first what the man had said. Then, as the gladiators went back to circling, Barbatus dripping blood freely, he turned. The crowd cheered, enjoying the apparent underdog's success, at least those who hadn't bet on Barbatus.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"That's Serpens, the snake. I thought I recognised the way he was moving. The tattoo proves it."

"Who is Serpens?"

“Oh, a very famous gladiator down south. Lucania. I lived there for a while, labouring on farms mainly. He was well known for his speed. Never beaten, despite his size. He would dance around his opponents and finish them off with cut after cut, no matter how big and strong they were. No one would have heard of him up here of course.”

“But why would he be using another name?”

“You know what a ringer is, right?”

As dread started to wash over Carbo, the gladiator calling himself Diomedes, who was actually called Serpens nipped in and opened up another cut in Barbatus’ shoulder. Carbo looked across to the table where Blandinus the bookmaker had his stall. Mero the lanista was standing with him, and as Carbo watched, Mero whispered something to Blandinus, who nodded and smiled. Carbo turned back to the fight in time to see Barbatus desperately using his shield to fend off a flurry of wickedly fast strikes. One time he was too slow, and another cut opened up, this time deep in the upper part of Barbatus’ sword arm. Barbatus’ arm sagged, and it took an obvious effort to lift it again. The crowd roared in delight.

Carbo stood up, then hesitated. The fight was rigged, a sham, and Barbatus was in mortal danger. But what could he do? People behind Carbo cursed him and yelled at him to sit down. He started to push his way forwards through the crowd, gathering more curses and angry shoves as he did so. The tempo of the fight was picking up, and Carbo saw a low blow from Diomedes bite deep into Barbatus’ leg, through the padding to draw blood.

Carbo pushed forwards with urgency now. He reached the barrier at the front of the crowd as Barbatus dropped to one knee, head bowed. Serpens swung, and his wickedly sharp gladius took Barbatus’ sword hand off at the wrist. Barbatus stared in disbelief at the pumping stump. Then he dropped his shield, and turned to the decurions, holding his left hand up for mercy.

The fickle crowd screamed for death. Carbo yelled to let him go, but his voice was drowned by the mob baying for blood. The decurions looked around. Then the leader of the council stepped forward, and turned his thumb up, jerking it towards the sky. The sign for an upward stroke to the heart. Death.

“No!” yelled Carbo, and leapt the barrier. Serpens did not hear, nor turn to see Carbo. Without hesitation, he thrust his sword deep into Barbatus chest, twisted, then used his foot to push Barbatus away. Barbatus slumped backwards to the ground, and was still. The crowd cheered madly.

Carbo reached the centre of the arena, and Serpens turned to face him. He removed his helmet, revealing a lined face and grey hair. He cocked his head on one side and regarded Carbo curiously. Carbo knelt by Barbatus and cradled his head in his hands. Barbatus stared up at Carbo, unblinking, his dead face showing an expression of amazement.

The crowd started to boo Carbo, and some started throwing fruit. Carbo laid Barbatus gently down and faced the decurions. He spoke in a loud voice, and the crowd hushed to hear what he had to say.

“This fight was a sham. This gladiator is not called Diomedes. He is an expert fighter from the south called Serpens. He was put forward as a no hoper, so Blandinus could cheat everyone who bet on Antiochus, or Barbatus.”

A low murmur ran around the crowd, and all eyes turned towards the bookmaker. Blandinus stepped into the arena.

“That’s a lie! If this gladiator resembles some other, that is just coincidence. And even if he has fought under another name elsewhere, neither the lanista nor I had knowledge of this.”

The leader of the decurions held up his hands for quiet, and the crowd reluctantly hushed. He addressed Carbo.

“You say this fight was a sham? That the crowd have been cheated?”

“Yes,” said Carbo emphatically.

“Then it seems to me that there should be a rematch. Tell me, are you a fighter? Do you think you can best this man?”

Carbo looked over at Serpens, who was looking at him with a self-confident smile. A wave of hatred washed over Carbo against this man who had killed his friend.

“Yes,” said Carbo.

The council leader nodded. “Then I declare a rematch. The previous fight is null and void, and all bets are carried forward to this one.”

Blandinus gaped. “You can’t do that. It’s not legal.”

The council leader turned to consult with his fellow decurions. “We are all in agreement. Abide by this, Blandinus, or face prosecution for cheating.”

Blandinus opened his mouth, but Mero at his shoulder tugged his toga. “Let them fight,” he said. “We will get the same result, and the decurions have declared the outcome binding.”

Blandinus looked uncertain, but was led away by Mero, leaving Carbo and Serpens alone in the arena. Carbo picked up Barbatus’ sica and hefted it’s unfamiliar weight. Then he picked up the shield, again lighter than he was used to. He contemplated putting on the helmet, but he didn’t want to disturb Barbatus to remove it. Besides, it looked like it restricted his vision in a way that the open helmets of the legions didn’t.

Two slaves came into the arena, and dragged Barbatus’ corpse away, leaving a trail of blood.

“What is your name, challenger?” said the council leader.

“Carbo,” said Carbo clearly.

“Very well, Carbo. Diomedes, or Serpens, or however you are known. Fight.”

The crowd, delighted by the encore, cheered wildly as Serpens donned his helmet and started to circle Carbo.

Carbo stood still, only his eyes moving as he watched the experienced gladiator. Serpens weaved his sword in the air, taunting Carbo with it. Carbo suppressed his rage, not allowing anger to control him, just giving in to it enough for it to fill his limbs with strength and power.

Serpens lunged without warning, a thrust to Carbo's exposed neck. Carbo swayed, feet planted firmly, and swatted the gladius away. Serpens retreated a step, and paused, seeming to appraise Carbo anew. Then he leapt in again, as fast as his namesake, an upward thrust aimed beneath Carbo's small shield. Carbo leaned back, the sword harmlessly swooshing past his face.

Serpens' stance betrayed surprise at the speed with which the bulky Carbo had evaded his attacks. He leapt in again, this time unleashing a flurry of perfectly timed strokes, aiming high and low, towards groin and face. Carbo matched each swing and thrust with his shield or sword, and as Serpens started to tire, he backhanded the gladiator across the head with his shield.

The ring of the tough wood against the metal helmet rang clearly around the arena, and Serpens staggered back, clearly dazed. Carbo remained still, holding his position, sword and shield low, inviting another attack.

Composure lost, Serpens let out a roar, and charged at Carbo, gladius outthrust. Carbo waited until the last moment, then sidestepped, putting out a foot to trip his opponent. Serpens went flying forward, losing his grip on shield and sword, and sprawled face first in the bloody sand. In an instant, Carbo was upon him, straddling his back, pulling his helmet back to expose his neck to the sharp sica.

Serpens held out his hand for mercy, and Carbo looked to the decurions. The crowd, fickle as ever, screamed for death. The decurion held out his

thumb sideways, then turned it down. The signal meant, 'Put your sword down. Let him live.' Carbo looked around at the crowd screaming for the death of this man who had tried to cheat them. By the arena wall, Barbatus' pale corpse, already attracting flies, had been carelessly dumped.

Carbo dragged the sica across Serpens throat, then stood back as bright red blood spurted out over the sands. Serpens clutched at the gaping wound, rolled onto his back, and started to convulse. After a few moments the convulsions stopped. The crowd was hushed, the decurions wore expressions of fury. Then the crowd erupted, yelling, "Carbo, Carbo," at full voice. The decurions noted the feelings of the crowd, and reluctantly joined in the applause.

Carbo threw his shield down and walked over to Mero and Blandinus. The two men shrank back from the large, bloodied man, who fought with such skill and strength. He grabbed them both and pulled them towards him. "You will pay the punters every copper coin that you owe them. Then you will give the widow of Barbatus enough money for a house and to be comfortable for the rest of her life. And you will pay for Barbatus' funeral. Make sure it is a send off worthy of a great fighter, and a hero of Rome."

Blandinus looked dejected. "This will ruin me," he complained.

"I should kill you both," said Carbo. "But do this, and I will let you live. Am I understood?"

Both men nodded pathetically. Carbo held their gaze to make sure of their intent, then released them. They backed away in relief. Carbo turned to take in the admiring crowd who were still chanting his name. He spat onto the sand, cast away his sica, and stalked out of the arena.

Carbo stayed in town long enough to attend Barbatus' funeral. He found his friends' grief-stricken widow, but could think of no words of comfort. He

ensured that Mero and Blandinus had upheld their promises, then took his leave. He walked away from Vienne, with just his gladius, and his purse of money. He set his shoulders and got into a legionary's rhythm of marching. It was still a long way to Rome.

Elissa the Priestess

In Watchmen of Rome, Elissa, priestess of the ancient Carthaginian gods, Lord Ba'al and Lady Tanit, harbours a hatred for the city of Rome and its citizens, and vows destruction on them all. This story tells us why.

AD 11, Carthage

Elissa knelt on the stone floor beside her father, Mago, and looked up at him. Soon it would be time for dinner, and her father would have to go to serve the master. Elissa knew that she too may be summoned, to dance or sing. Since her first flow, her master had started to take more of an interest in her, and her father had tried to prepare her for the day when he would take her to his bed. It wouldn't be long, she realised, and the images it conjured made her shudder. She pushed the thought away and instead concentrated on her father's deep, soothing voice.

Mago was recounting a familiar tale of their ancestors, the story of how Hannibal humiliated the Romans, at Cannae. He loved the military detail, but the tactics and formations and units bored her. Still, it was precious time in her father's company, and it was the only time she saw his eyes light with pride. She took his hand as he reached the climax, the wings of Hannibal's Carthaginian army enclosing the larger Roman army, and annihilating it.

Mago sighed. "Our ancestors, Elissa, were mighty once. They ruled the Middle Sea, and they made the Romans wet their beds in terror. Hannibal was the greatest, but he was let down by the scared old men in the Senate. And so our state was humbled, our city destroyed, our people massacred, the survivors scattered to the corners of the world. Most of the descendants of the Carthaginian race probably don't even realise who their glorious

forefathers were any more. But some of us remember. Some of us pass the tales down, from father and mother to son and daughter, even though we are humble slaves in the eyes of the Romans. Don't ever forget Elissa. Keep the memory alive, that Carthage was once the greatest in the world. And that it was Rome that took that away."

Elissa nodded, and gave her father's hand a squeeze. The stories her father told warmed her heart, focused her mind on something that made her different, special, even during the mind-numbing drudgery of her domestic work, or through the beatings for real or fictitious misdemeanour.

Her father took a necklace from around his neck. She wondered for the rest of her life whether he had had some sort of premonition that day, that had prompted the action. He slipped it around her head, and she fingered the small amulet that hung from it, a little miniature of a woman with outstretched arms.

"This was your mother's, Elissa. Like her mother before her, she was a priestess in the service of the divine Lady Tanit, Face of Ba'al."

Elissa nodded. She remembered the tales her mother had told her of the divine couple, Lady Tanit and Lord Ba'al Hammon. Despite being a slave, her mother was able to continue presiding over the worship of Tanit, and Elissa has attended some of the meetings, the mysterious ceremonies fascinating the young girl. In the end, it had cost her mother's life - the Master had beaten her to death in anger when once too often he required her presence and found she was occupied with her religious duties.

"Keep it safe, my beautiful girl, and when you look at it, remember your mother, and me, and remember Carthage."

A bell sounded, and with a brief kiss on the top of Elissa's head, Mago was gone. She moved to her bed, a straw mattress on wooden slats, and sat quietly. She looked around her at the plain walls, the small window high up

providing the only light, the two beds the only furniture. This was where she spent her life, when she wasn't at work, cleaning or sewing. Her thoughts drifted back to her father's stories. What would it have been like to be a princess in the great city, with servants of her own, jewels, fine dresses, sumptuous delicacies to eat? What would it have been like, just to be free in your own city?

A wellspring of resentment rose up in her. It wasn't fair. Curse the Romans. Roman mastery was all she had known, but she wanted more. A tear came to the corner of her eye.

She was interrupted by the door to her room being flung open without a knock. The household steward was there, Tegius, and he looked her up and down with an unashamedly lecherous eye. She knew she was becoming attractive to more than just her master, that her blooming looks were drawing the attention of all the males in the household.

"The master has requested a song, girl," said Tegius. "Come."

He strode out and Elissa hurried after him. She entered the dining room, and caught her father's eye, who was standing behind the master, holding a plate of meats. He looked momentarily concerned to see her, but smiled at her encouragingly. She moved to the side of the room, and waited until she was acknowledged. There were only three diner's tonight, the master, the mistress and a male friend who gossip informed her was a regular drinking buddy of the master. He was corpulent, large folds of fat hanging off his arms and neck, and the skin of his face had some sort of pustular infection afflicting it. A short time passed, as the three wealthy Romans talked, laughed and took morsels from the various plates offered them by the numerous serving slaves in the room.

"The stupid dolt just wanders his palace these days, crying 'Varus, Varus, give me back my legions,'" said her master's friend.

“Careful, Gnaeus. That stupid dolt is still our Emperor, and he would still have you strangled quietly in the jail if he heard you talk like that.”

“How would he hear? There are only three people in this room.”

Elissa gritted her teeth, but said nothing. She knew that many Romans considered that slaves were less than people.

“One day you will talk idly in the wrong company, and that will be the end of you.”

“Nonsense. Augustus is not what he once was. The Varian disaster has shrivelled him. He will not be long for this world, I wager.”

Elissa remembered the day her father had told her about the Varian disaster. Three legions of Romans had been slaughtered in a place far to the north called Germania, by a barbarian army. She could still remember the excitement in her father’s voice, the satisfaction at the Romans’ undoing. For some time there were even rumours that the Germans would descend on Rome itself. Maybe the whole Empire would fall, even here in Carthage and in soft, hopeful voices, the slaves whispered among themselves of liberation, of freedom.

Of course it came to nothing, and hope dashed, the slaves of the household continued their chores, and suffered their abuses.

“Enough of your treason,” said her master, the laugh in his voice indicating he was at least partly jesting. “Let’s have some music. Elissa, sing for us.”

Elissa stepped forward. She sang, without accompaniment, and her voice was firm, clear, and in perfect pitch.

“O home of my fathers
Destroyed by your enemies
Your fields salted
Your people gone

O home of my people
Once the greatest of all
How humble are you now
Naught remains for you
But sorrow
And hope for revenge”

Her voice trailed away on the last note.

“I told you she had a pure voice,” said her master.

“And fine hips,” said Gnaeus, looking her up and down. “Turn around for me, girl.”

She did as she was bid, turning a slow circle, feeling the man’s gaze on her.

“Very nice,” said Gnaeus, licking his lips. “Perhaps after dinner, you would permit me to take her to my room...?”

Elissa’s heart lurched. Had the time come? She had steeled herself that it would be soon, but had presumed it would be her master, who at least was not repulsive in looks, the way his friend was. Her master hesitated.

“She is virgin, Gnaeus,” he said.

“My, then you are being generous to your guest tonight, my old friend.”

Her master sighed. “As you wish. Elissa, go to Gnaeus quarters and await him.”

Elissa looked at her father, who held her gaze helplessly, tears welling in his eyes. She nodded to her master.

“Yes, master,” and retreated to the guest room.

She had no idea how much time had passed, as she sat on the feather bed, with its fine cloth sheets, and looked around at the wall paintings of scenes from mythology, and the beautiful carved furniture, all lit by fine brass oil lamps. The contrast with her own lowly accommodation was marked, and she wondered at the life the privileged of the Roman Empire lived.

The door opened and she started. Gnaeus stood silhouetted in the doorway, swaying slightly and holding onto the door frame for support. He slipped his toga off, so it settled at his feet, and kicked the door closed. She looked at his naked body in disgust, warts protruding from fat that gathered in rolls down his breasts and belly, which sagged down over his groin. Then he tottered forward to the bed, and let himself slump on it face down.

“A massage, girl” he said, voice slightly muffled by the soft pillow he was lying on. Elissa gathered herself and tentatively started to rub his shoulders.

“Harder. I want a massage from a girl, not a mouse!” Elissa put more force into her fingertips, working on the muscles of his shoulders and back. Gnaeus started to moan in contentment, and she knew she was pleasing him. A thoughtful servant had put some scented oil by the bedside, and she poured some into her hands and massaged his back up and down.

He turned over suddenly to lay on his back and she saw his rod had grown, so it was half erect, but flopped over to one side.

“Now my front, girl.” She did as commanded, massaging the oil over his chest, but he grabbed her wrist and forced her hand lower to his shaft. She gripped it, and moved her hand up and down, as she had heard the other slave girls described. He groaned more. “Faster, girl. Harder.” She did as commanded, but her unpracticed technique was clumsy, and he yelped as she pressed too hard and bent his member painfully. He sat up and cuffed her hard across the side of the head, sending her flying to the floor. He

moved to her and grabbed her by the hair and pulled her to the bed, thrusting her forwards so she was kneeling on the floor, her torso on the bed, face buried in the blankets. Gnaeus lifted her dress up, while holding her head downwards by the hair, and she felt him trying to enter her. His rod was fully hard now, but she was unaroused and scared, and he found it hard to enter her. He cursed her, and pushed a finger inside her, and she cried in pain and arched forward. He held her still, spreading her, and thrust his cock inside her.

The pain was indescribable. She screamed aloud, and he hit her again and again. She barely felt the blows though, the pain from between her legs blocking everything out, and she continued to scream as he thrust into her. He cursed her, swore at her to shut up, but she was beyond reason now, and she struggled and screamed and cried for help as he raped her.

The door flew open, she heard a voice that a part of her recognised, and then the assault stopped. She pulled herself onto the bed, curling up with the blanket, and turned round. Her father was standing in the room, face more angry than she had ever seen. He held Gnaeus up against the wall by the throat, but he was looking at her. Something wet dripped into her eyes, blurring her vision, and she wiped the liquid away. Looking down at her hand she saw it was covered in blood.

“Elissa,” said her father. He tried to say more, but the words seemed to halt in his throat.

“I’m sorry, father,” she said, in a small voice.

Gnaeus looked into Mago’s eyes.

“Get your fucking hands off me,” he said. “I am going to make it my business to rape that slut of a daughter of yours every night till she begs to die, you pathetic little slave.”

Mago gave his daughter one more anguished look. Elissa felt a thrill of fear go through her, as she realised what was about to happen. She opened her mouth to try to restrain her father, but she was too late. Before any words came from her mouth, Mago produced a knife from his tunic and thrust it straight into Gnaeus' heart. Blood spurted around the wound, and Mago looked down in amazement. His mouth sagged open, and he slid down the wall to the ground.

Mago stared at the dagger. Elissa was frozen in shock. Blood pooled around Gnaeus' naked corpse.

"Father," whispered Elissa. He looked up at her, and then his features changed, set and hardened. He slid the dagger back under his tunic and grabbed her wrist, pulling her from the bed. His grip hurt, along with so many other parts of her, and she cried out, but he didn't relent.

"Come with me," he hissed, and dragged her to his chamber. Rummaging under his mattress, he pulled out a small bag of coins and pressed them into her hand, then took the dagger from his tunic and gave it to her. "Take these, and run. Head for the docks. Buy yourself passage for Rome. You aren't branded or collared, no one will know you are a slave. In Rome, there are a million people you can hide amongst. Go, and live your life as a free woman."

Elissa stared at him in total disbelief. "Father, why?"

"What I've done, there is no going back now. It means destruction."

He wrapped his arms around her, and she felt his tears wetting her hair. "I love you, Elissa."

"I love you, too, father," she sobbed, holding him tight. He paused just a moment, and then pried her off him.

“You must go now, before the body is discovered, before dawn.” He led her through the house, through the atrium, and quietly passed the dozing door guard. Once out of his earshot, he embraced her again.

“Father, I don’t know what to do. Come with me, we can go together.”

“I can’t. I am known on the boats. The master sends me there regularly to barter for the delicacies arriving from Rome. They would report me the moment I asked for passage. Your best chance is alone.”

“But what will they do to you?”

“I don’t know.” He shivered. “But it won’t matter. They can do what they please, as long as I know you are safe. Now please, go.”

“No, please, I can’t, not alone.”

“You must. You will. It is death to stay. Goodbye Elissa. Go to Rome, but never forget you are a daughter of Carthage, and never forget what that Empire has done to your people. And don’t forget...” His voice caught a little.

“Don’t forget me.”

“Never, father.”

He turned and walked back to the house. She waited for him to look back, but he disappeared inside without a backward glance. She stood, feeling paralysed with helplessness. But slowly, resolve worked its way into her body. She turned away from the house, and started to walk towards the docks.

The ship rolled and pitched and yawed with the waves, and she clung to a side rail. The pain between her legs had so far only eased a little, on top of which she felt like emptying her stomach into the sea. They were less than a day out from Carthage, en route to Sicily first. The boat’s captain had been good to her, letting her use his quarters, and had made sure she was fed. The coins that had been her father’s life savings had helped of course.

Two sailors leered at her, and she fingered the dagger under her tunic, wondering if she would need to use it, before the captain barked a command at them and they sauntered off. The captain came over to her, and asked how she was. She replied politely, but the misery in her expression and tone must have been obvious. He seemed about to say more, when his cook walked up.

“Captain, there are maggots in the beef. We must have been conned. The food was good when I checked it, I swear it.”

“You idiot,” growled the captain. “Surely you should know by now to check more than the first one they show you.”

The cook cursed, and spat on the deck. “I did, I checked several. Those miserable Carthaginians must have swapped them when I was watching the executions.”

“What executions?” said Elissa, cold gripping her heart suddenly.

“Oh, some idiot Roman was crucifying his slaves. The whole cursed household can you believe. A guest had been murdered in the house apparently, and the Roman put the whole lot of them up on crosses on the hillside, to make an example of them. Must have more money than sense if he can afford to get rid of that much livestock without compensation.”

“All of them?” asked Elissa, voice quavering.

“Men, women and children, nearly a hundred of them. Some of them were still screaming when I left. Some of the little ones had died already. Most of them were just hanging there, waiting for the crows.”

Elissa leaned over the rail and retched, and kept retching though her stomach had nothing left to give up. Her father’s words came back to her. “Never forget what that Empire has done to your people.” She vowed on her father’s shade that she never would.

Vespillo and the Thracian revolt

In Watchmen of Rome, we meet Vespillo, the commander of one of the Watchmen's stations. In this extract from an early draft of Watchmen, we find out why Vespillo left the army and ended up in the lowly vigiles.

Carbo sat with Vespillo in the tavern that was becoming locally known as "Carbo's place." It was early evening and the place was packed. Carbo's reputation for being able to keep order within his establishment had been good for business among those who wanted to be able to drink and talk and gamble without the threat of violence. Carbo made sure that his customers had no doubts about the consequences if they stepped out of line. Already this evening, two drunken members of the urban cohorts had fallen out over a game of Tali, one claiming he had thrown the Venus hand, the highest possible, while the other accused him of cheating. When they had started to come to uncoordinated blows, Carbo had cracked their heads together and tossed them both out, sprawling on the streets, to much laughter and applause. Vatius, drinking in his usual seat, had toasted Carbo with a full cup of wine, far from sober himself.

"Not only an old man becomes a second child," said Vatius. "But also a drunkard."

"Socrates?" hazarded Carbo.

"Plato, actually. Good guess though."

A long sleep during the day had relieved Carbo and Vespillo of some of the tiredness that the previous night's exertions had caused them, although they both still ached and stung from burns, cuts and bruises. Carbo rubbed the

lump on the back of his head, where his skull had connected with the ground despite the thickness of the mattress. It throbbed, and he probed it despite the pain. He was lucky not to have cracked his head open, or to have suffered after effects of the injury. He had seen more than one man die some hours after obtaining a head wound in battle which appeared from the outside not to be serious.

“Why did you do it?” asked Carbo.

Vespillo drank deeply from a cup, and wiped his grey beard with the back of his hand. He belched.

“Do what?”

“Run into a burning building.”

“It was my job.”

“It was the job of every man there. You were the only one to do it.”

“Not the only one. Some idiot civilian followed me in. Why was that?”

Carbo shrugged. He wasn't sure himself. He knew that he liked this man, and thought that he probably needed him too. Certainly he was the only friend he had in Rome right now.

“I think it must be the military training. You follow your commander into battle, wherever he leads.”

“I'm not your commander.”

“I got caught up in the moment. I felt like one of your men. Anyway, I asked why you went in, first. I wouldn't have done that.”

“I wonder. I think you might. Especially if it was to rescue someone you cared about.”

“That's just it though. The deaths of that family would have been a tragedy, but they meant nothing to me. I wouldn't have risked my life for them. I risked it for you. So why did you go in? What were you trying to prove?”

Vespillo swirled the contents of his cup around, looking down into it, as if they would provide him with a simple answer. Then he looked up at Carbo.

“Do you want to know my story? How I ended up a ranker in the *vigiles*?”

Carbo regarded him steadily. “Do you want to tell me?”

Vespillo paused then said, “Yes, I think I do.” He sighed.

“Pannonia was bad,” he went on. “Do you remember it?”

“I was in Germany at the time. I recall that old Biberius Caldius Mero had withdrawn a lot of troops from Dalmatia and Pannonia for a campaign on the Danube.” Carbo used Tiberius Claudius Nero’s old army nickname, meaning drinker of strong hot wine.

“That’s right. It was a mistake. Pannonia had never accepted Roman rule, and there had already been several rebellions in the past few years. As soon as our troop numbers reduced, they rebelled in strength. They killed citizens, traders, wiped out a detachment of auxiliaries. The rebellion grew, and even threatened Italy. Tiberius and Germanicus brought troops from throughout the Empire, but even with their skills and all that manpower, the war dragged on for four years. I was at Raetinum.”

Carbo’s eyebrows went up. “You were there at the fire? What happened?”

Vespillo’s face clouded. “We made a breach in the town wall. We thought it was all over, just mopping up to do once we were inside the defences. But the rebels fired their own homes. We had already started to let our guard down. Many of the boys were in the houses, looting, pillaging, raping no doubt. You know the score. Hundreds of us were trapped in the flames. You never get used to the stench of cooking flesh, the screams of people burning to death. But that first time was the worst.”

“So that’s why you joined the *vigiles*?”

Vespillo shook his head. "I wish it was so noble. Truth is, the vigiles were the only ones that would have me. Even the urban cohorts wouldn't touch me with a pilum."

Carbo was quiet, letting Vespillo collect himself.

"When the war was over, we thought we would get our rewards. Land, discharge for those who had served their time. All our back pay. Then we heard about the Teutoberg disaster, and everything changed."

Vespillo noticed that Carbo had gone very still. "Were you there?" he asked.

Carbo nodded. When he said nothing, Vespillo continued.

"The immediate panic was understandable. We had lost a lot of manpower, so the cancelling of leave and of discharges was reasonable under the circumstances. But time went by. I was promoted to centurion. Kept my head down, did as I was told. The lads though, they weren't happy. Rations were short, pay was down and veterans were forced to remain with the colours even after their official discharge had been granted. Discontent was rife, so punishment became over harsh. Barely a day went by without one of the lads being lashed, or worse.

"Then Augustus died. The boys saw it as a chance to petition the new emperor for better conditions. A legionary called Percennius stirred things up, giving voice to the complaints of the men, like veterans still under arms after forty years of service, low pay, too much punishment, and even when finally discharged being rewarded with land in a swamp or a mountain. It all fell on receptive ears. Soon the local villages were being looted, the centurions being assaulted. Riots spread and the whole situation spiralled out of control. The civilians suffered again. Robbery, rape murder." He shook his head.

"Were you part of the revolt?"

Vespillo shook his head. “No, and I was beaten well as a result. Although later, after Drusus had talked the mutineers down, my loyalty was noted and I was promoted to leading centurion of the second cohort. I was posted to a border fort in Thrace. Life became simpler, and more comfortable. I met a local woman, Orphea, who lived in one of the villages near the fort. She became as near to my wife as it is possible for a soldier to have. I made her comfortable, made sure the locals knew she was under my protection, and to be left alone. She was resented, even ostracised for her fraternising with the occupiers, but she bore it well, and she loved me. Eventually, we had a son together.”

Carbo looked up sharply. He had thought Vespillo was childless. Vespillo didn't meet his gaze, and continued to stare down at the table. For a moment, he didn't speak, and Carbo wondered if he had decided he had said enough. Then he went on, and this time his voice cracked as he spoke.

“Two years ago, the Thracians revolted. The recruiting officers had been through their towns and villages, enthusiastically press-ganging anyone of military age into the legions. The Thracians probably had the right of it. They were certainly suffering, and at first they made peaceful representations. The governor, Gaius Poppaeus Sabinus, played for time until reinforcements arrived. A legion from Moesia, and some loyal Thracian auxiliaries answered his call, and he took the fight to the rebels. After his first victories, he moved his headquarters closer to the enemy camp, and he left the loyal Thracian auxiliaries behind to guard his previous headquarters. I was stationed with the governor, fortifying his camp. The Thracians were fortified in the hills, and it became something of a standoff. Then word got back to the camp of how the loyal Thracians were behaving. Apparently with the blessing of their superiors, they were allowed to plunder the local countryside, provided they were back at night to guard the camp. That included my Orphea's village.”

Vespillo shook his head. “Remember, I had seen it before. The Pannonian uprising. The mutiny by the Pannonian legions. I had seen what happened to civilians when soldiers drunk on wine and rage and battle lust were let loose on them.

“I petitioned the Governor to command them to restraint, or to send a detachment to enforce discipline. He ignored me, told me that the locals were in revolt, and they were getting what they deserved. I cursed him, and he had me removed from his presence. I was broken to the ranks, and put on sentry duty. Out of my mind with worry, I deserted.”

Vespillo looked into Carbo’s eyes now, searching for a reaction. Carbo tried to keep his expression neutral, but he felt shock inside. Of all the crimes a member of the legions could commit, desertion was surely the worst. Punishment was usually being beaten or stoned to death in front of his comrades. How was Vespillo even still alive?

“I ran through the countryside, avoiding Roman patrols, Thracian rebels and rioting Thracian loyalists. I ran past burning villages and crops, past trees with bodies nailed to them, many still alive. I skirted around groups of soldiers who had cornered civilians, an old man they were stoning, a woman they were taking it in turns to rape. When I came to Orpheas’s village, it was already alight. Soldiers went from house to house, as they drunk and laughed among the destruction. Orpheas’s house wasn’t burning, and I felt a surge of hope as I rushed inside.

“Orpheas was on her back on her table. A Thracian soldier was between her legs, while another jeered and laughed. I killed the spectator first with a thrust in his back, then when the other stood, I stabbed him in the heart. Then I turned to help Orpheas. She was already dead, her throat cut. In the corner, head caved in, was my four year old son.”

Carbo reached out and put a hand over his, squeezing firmly. “You don’t need to say any more.”

Vespillo swallowed. “There were ten Thracian auxiliaries in the village. They were drunk and slow. I killed them all. Then I returned to the governor and threw myself on his mercy. When he heard my story he put me in the front line, aiming to carry out my full punishment after the battle. I think he hoped I would die in the assault. I think I hoped I would too.

“The Thracians were desperate when they came, starving and out of water. They attacked with stones and fire-hardened stakes and branches of trees. Behind them their women screamed them onwards. We fought all day, and then night fell and we fought all night. In the dark, no one could tell friend from enemy. Echoes of the enemies cries came from behind us, and some of the men thought we had been overrun, and they broke. I stayed and fought. Those of us left pushed the Thracians back to their hill fortress at dawn, and they surrendered.

“I was taken before the governor, ready to receive my punishment. In view of the way I had fought, and the reasons for my desertion, he took pity on me. I was dishonourably discharged, quietly and without fuss. I lost my back pay and my chance of any land on retirement. I made my way back to Rome, doing odd jobs along the way, or begging scraps of food.

“When I arrived in Rome, I was destitute. I was sleeping under the aqueducts and in the temple doorways, begging along with the rest of the poor. Some of the crippled veterans I begged with told me about the *vigiles*, how they would take anyone, so I applied. They were right. I didn’t hide the truth of my dishonourable discharge, but my recruiting officer didn’t care. The *vigiles* were made up of thugs and freedman, and they were keen to have someone with experience of the legions, especially the officer.

“I threw myself into the work, and found that I enjoyed it. It’s exciting and rewarding, genuinely helping the people of Rome. I could put the memories aside, and I could try to restore my pride, bury the dishonour of desertion, and of failing to save my family. My work was noticed, and I was promoted, quickly. I met Severa, who was the widow of a local tradesman, and we married. Life now is good. I enjoy my work, I command a lot of men, I have a position in the community, respect, and a wife who loves me.”

“Yet still you have something to prove don’t you,” said Carbo quietly.

“Yes,” said Vespillo. “And I always will.”

The Battlefield

The first news we received of the battle came with the arrival of a wounded centurion. I abandoned my game of legionaries and barbarians that I was playing with Roscius, the head cook's son. He was moaning about having to play the barbarians again, anyway, and was imparting little enthusiasm to the role. At twelve years of age, though, I am two years his senior, and it was only natural that I should be the Roman. If the roles were reversed, then Rome would lose, and that is plainly unthinkable. So we dropped the sticks we had been using as gladii, and watched with excitement the slow progress of the dirty, tired, wounded soldier, as he limped down the paved path leading to the villa.

As soon as he entered the atrium, we sprinted to the door and peeked around. The soldier was on the floor, slumped against the wall. Urtha, the Numidian housekeeper, who was also my father's companion since my mother died trying to give me a sister, leant over him. Her face showed concern as she examined his wounds. She looked up, and spotted me.

"Pedius," she said. "Fetch your father."

I groaned. He was in the bottom vineyard, surveying the early spring's growth. It was at least a mile.

"Hurry," said Urtha. Roscius grinned impudently at me, but I couldn't cuff him in front of Urtha, so I turned and hurried out.

"Run, Pedius!" I sighed, and broke into a trot.

I found my father, wandering up and down the trellises, making marks on a wax tablet with a stylus.

"Father! Father!" He didn't turn.

"Not now, Peditus. I'm busy."

"Urtha sent me." He looked up.

"Oh?"

"A soldier's here. He's hurt."

"Hmm." He looked wistfully at the vines, then at the tablet, then at me.

"Then I suppose I'd better come."

We walked back together, my father in no hurry, while I danced from foot to foot, anxious to hear the soldier's story.

"Do you think there's been a battle?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"The master's in Rome because of some trouble there, isn't he?"

"The master's affairs are not for discussion."

"But since Nero killed himself . . ."

"Peditus." His voice was still quiet, but I knew I could push no further. I maintained an agitated silence until we reached the villa. Urtha was waiting for us, outwardly calm, but her face showing obvious disapproval of my father's tardiness.

"Where is this legionary?" asked my father.

"In Miriam's room at present."

Miriam, the Jewish serving girl, had experienced a beating from my father for being caught with a strange man in her bedroom. She probably relished the chance to have another here legitimately.

Urtha and my father walked round to the back of the villa, to Miriam's room. I followed quietly, trying to stay unnoticed. Urtha and my father went in to the room, and I saw the usually squeamish Miriam tending the soldier's wound. Before Urtha's big bottom blocked my view, I caught a glimpse of the man's face. His beard was streaked with dust, his forehead split wide by a deep gash, and his cheeks were pale. But his eyes held me. They were tired, and so, so sad.

"His wounds?" asked my father.

Urtha replied. "Deep, but he will live."

My father nodded, then addressed the soldier.

"I am Plotius, chief steward of this household. I bid you welcome in the name of my master, Gaius Cominius Rufus. May I ask your name?"

There was a pause, then the reply came in a flat, husky voice.

"Servilius."

"And your legion?"

Another pause. Then, "I am a centurion of the Thirteenth Gemina."

"Will you tell us how you received your injuries?"

I shifted my position so I could see round Urtha's fat legs, and I saw his gaze lift from the floor to fix on my father.

"I have fought in a bloody battle near Cremona. The usurper Vitellius led the German legions against the Emperor Otho. My men are massacred and the Emperor is dead."

My father nodded. The change of Emperor was unlikely to affect us, it never had in the past. Cremona was near, but not uncomfortably so. We would see few other soldiers, if any, and this one, wounded as he was, must have been wandering for two days before he found us.

"I am tired and hungry, Plotius."

"Attend him, Miriam."

I retreated as Urtha and my father left him, and went into the peristylum to reflect on what I had heard. Roscius was there, and he pestered me for news. I told him what I knew, all the time watching Urtha and my father conversing in the house. I willed my father back to his vines, Urtha back to her duties, so I could sneak once more to the centurion. After an age, my father gave Urtha a brief kiss on the cheek, and they parted to go about their business. I abandoned Roscius in the garden and went back to Miriam's room, where I took up my position just outside the door.

Miriam was bathing the wound on the centurion's head, while he hungrily ate from a wooden bowl filled with steaming broth. They said nothing, but Miriam beamed down at him with a possessive look on her face. He finished the soup, set the bowl on the floor, and let out a loud burp.

"Do you have any wine?"

Miriam hesitated. "Nothing of fine vintage."

He grimaced. "Anything will do."

In her hurry to fetch his refreshment, she bumped into me and we clashed heads.

"Pedijs," she hissed, rubbing her forehead. "What are you doing here?"

"I want to see the soldier," I whispered back.

"Well he's ill, and he doesn't want to be disturbed by a little boy like you."

"Whereas I'm sure he loves being disturbed by a little girl like you!"

Miriam drew herself up to her full height. "I am not a little girl. I am nearly sixteen. And I am looking after him. And I think he likes me."

I laughed. "You're dreaming again, Miriam."

She opened her mouth to retort, but a harsh voice came from inside the bedroom. "What's all that whispering about? Where's my blasted wine?"

"Don't you disturb him, Pedijs. Promise."

"I promise."

She hurried off to the wine cellar, and as soon as she turned the corner, I went into the room.

"Hello, I'm Pedijs."

He acknowledged me with a nod. I got my first close up look at him. He wore a dirty red cloak and a torn tunic. On the floor were his armour and sword, dented and nicked, and his helmet, the crest of feathers flattened and tattered. His bare leg bore a thick black scab which ran from his knee up underneath his tunic. This man had been in a real battle, where men had really died, I thought.

"What are you gawking at boy?"

"Does that hurt?" I asked.

"Of course it damned well hurts!"

"Did you kill anyone?"

"No, we just played dice. You ask the most stupid questions."

"What was it like? I mean fighting, killing people."

He looked at me for a long moment.

"You really want to know what it's like?"

I nodded.

"It's terrifying. All around you, your friends are dying. You're bleeding. People are trying to kill you, and the only way to stop them is to kill them. And after, the ground is black with blood, and more full of flesh than a butcher's shop."

"It sounds exciting," I said, feeling the thrill of battle, imagining the bugle calls, the clash of arms, the glory.

"You're not listening, are you? It is worse than the foulest torments of Hades."

"I'd like to join the army one day."

He raised his voice. "You little fool. You have no idea." He tried to rise, then let out a cry and sank back, clutching his leg. Miriam came in, carrying a cup of wine.

"Pedius, I told you not to come in here. You've upset the centurion. Get out!"

"But . . ."

"Out! Or I'll fetch your father."

Reluctantly, I left the room.

The rest of the day I spent kicking morosely around the house. I wanted to speak further to the soldier, but didn't wish to incur my father's wrath, which though slow, once roused was severe. Then I hit on my plan, to see war for myself. So I was two days late, but there was a real battlefield, just a half day's ride from the villa. I couldn't pass up the opportunity Mars had granted me.

I barely slept, so excited was I. I must have dozed, but I woke long before the sun appeared above the hills to the east of the villa. While the household slept, I tiptoed to the stables, saddled a pony, and rode south.

I was a fair rider. My father allowed me to ride from time to time - it was one of the benefits of being the steward's son. The landscape slowly brightened as I rode, and with the burgeoning day, the amount of traffic on the road increased. Most of it was the usual sort - carts taking produce to market, merchants transporting wine and other essentials, the wealthy travelling from town houses to country estates. But another type of traveller caught my eye - men, usually in groups of three or four. Those heading towards Cremona looked anxious and hurried. Those travelling in the opposite direction sweated under the load of full sacks, clanking with the sounds of metal.

Cremona was a city in festival mood. The streets were full, citizens, slaves, and many, many soldiers, mingling, drinking, dancing. Jugglers and pipers jostled for space on the street corners, vendors of wine and pastries competed to make themselves heard above the noise of the party. I dismounted and led my horse through the town. It was mid afternoon, so I chewed some bread from my saddlebag.

A hand slapped down on my shoulder, and I jumped.

"Boy, drink some wine. Celebrate the victory of the Emperor Vitellius."

I turned to find myself face to face with an unshaven, semi-uniformed, but happy legionary. He proffered me an amphora, half full.

"Drink, boy." I took a deep draught, then spat it out. It was unwatered wine. My father had only ever let me drink watered wine before - he said I must wait until I left behind the toga praetexta of childhood and donned the toga virilis of manhood before drinking my wine neat.

"Too strong for you, boy? You're a flower, like those overpaid Praetorians. We showed them a thing or two about fighting."

"Were you in the battle?"

"Was I in the battle? It could have been lost without me. Let me tell you . . ."

I would have loved to hear his tale, but I wanted to get to the battlefield and return before dark.

"Where was the battle fought?"

"Eh? Oh, about five miles east of here, on the Via Postumia."

"Thank you. Goodbye." I mounted my horse.

"Where are you going? I haven't told you my story. Damned boy."

I left the festival behind and rode east. The unusual travellers with the full sacks were more numerous here. I also noticed a lot of plots of freshly dug earth in the fields by the roadside. I realised what they were when I came across a party of grave diggers. They were walking wearily back towards Cremona, shovels resting on their shoulders.

"Don't die out there boy, will you?" cried one, as I rode past. "We've enough work to do tomorrow."

Then I started to encounter the bodies. The first one I saw, I noticed by the feet sticking out from behind a bush. I cautiously dismounted and inspected the unmoving corpse. At first, I saw no mark on him. It was only when I moved some twigs to see his neck and head, that I saw the mortal wound, a slash across the neck so deep it must have reached his backbone. I staggered back in shock, and unbidden, my stomach voided my lunch. Weakly, I remounted and continued east.

The corpses became more and more frequent as I rode. Although I didn't stop to look closely at any more, I could see that most had been stripped of armour, weapons, jewellery and often even clothes. From time to time, I saw the men engaged in this salvage, working in groups to fill their sacks.

I rounded a corner and halted. The road was dark red. I looked around. Piled in ditches, spread at random round the vineyards, slumped against trees, face down, face up, were bodies. Thousands. A powerful stench pervaded the air, like the smell of a long dead sheep I had once found. All around, as busy as ants, men were attending the dead. No last rites here, no kiss to accept the dying soul. Their only purpose was to rob the dead of the

things they no longer needed. The flocks of black birds took the flesh that didn't interest the men.

A movement caught my eye. It was one of the bodies at the side of the road. I moved my horse closer. I thought I could detect motion from his chest. Was he breathing, still alive after all this time? I feared to get near, so I took an empty bottle from my bag and threw it at him. It thumped into his upper body. Immediately, there was a commotion. Two rats, their faces bloody, came scuttling out of his tunic and bolted across the road. Startled, my horse reared and I was thrown off backwards. I hit my head, and everything went dark.

When I awoke, it was still dark. Then I realised I was looking at the night sky, freckled with stars. My horse was gone and my head hurt. Not a living soul stirred - no one would stay here after the light had faded. I was alone with the thousands of newly dead, violently slain, taken from this world before their time. I clutched at the bulla round my neck, and prayed it would do its job and protect me from evil spirits.

I had no idea which direction would take me home, but fear forbade me to stay in one place. I started along the road in the direction I thought from the stars was the right one. Rustlings by the side of the road made me jump. Was it animals, the wind? Or something else?

A dark shape loomed in front of me. I hesitated, then approached. Thanks be to Jupiter. It was my horse. I mounted, and rode at a gallop, praying we wouldn't hit a pothole, that he wouldn't break his leg. Slowly, I left the dead behind, and eventually, the walls of Cremona appeared before me.

I didn't stop, and rode through the night. I reached my master's villa before dawn, bedded my horse, then bedded myself.

I took my father's beating with equanimity. There was no malice in it, I think he felt it was his duty. Urtha gave me the verbal rebukes, how everyone was worried, what if the master had found out. Then, uncharacteristically, she gave me a hug. It surprised me, but soon my mind went back to the sounds, sights and smells of the battlefield. I wandered into the peristylum. Roscius and Miriam were there.

"The soldier's gone, Pedius," said Roscius. Miriam started to cry.

"Is it true you went to the battlefield?"

I nodded.

"What was it like?"

I was quiet.

"Oh, come on, Pedius, tell me." He picked up a stick. "Let's play Romans and barbarians. You can be Roman. I want to be a soldier. Don't you?"

I shook my head.

"No, Roscius. I don't think I do."

The Wall

Ides of September

My dearest Flavianus,

I have just finished reading your letter. I was surprised you couldn't find more to write - I remember Emerita as rife with rumour and scandal when I left. I hope you're not holding back on me, old friend.

Thank you for the news of Claudia. I am pleased that she is well, and I return the message of love she sent. Tell her I will write soon.

I have been here a month now, and I'm beginning to learn the routine, although at first, I seemed to be on fatigues every other day for some transgression or other. The route march from Emerita was hard work - even with most of our kit in the wagons, our armour, pilum, gladius and shield seemed to grow heavier by the day. The heat was intense as well, although it lessened as we marched north. We were fortunate to have a kindly centurion, who allowed us plenty of breaks to take water. I have heard of men dying on these marches.

Britannia is a dull country. Most of it is wooded and although the greenery is pleasing to the eye, it is so often blurred with mist or darkened by grey skies and rain, it is rare to get the chance to appreciate it.

Our first stop was Camulodonum, a medium-sized town which serves as the Provincial Headquarters. If we had been stationed here, I would have been pleased. Although it is nothing compared to Emerita in size, it still has theatres and shops and taverns. When I asked the centurion if this was where

we'd be staying, he laughed. "We're going to the Wall, boy," he said. I didn't like the way he said it.

After a short stop, we marched north, and though I understood Britannia was a small country, the march seemed to go on forever. The road north was busy, troops marching in both directions, wagons of army supplies, Britons with their pack animals loaded down with grain and vegetables and that foul beer they drink.

We exchanged shouts with passing soldiers, and a frequent exchange went thus:

"Where are you going?"

"The Wall."

"Well wrap up warm, then." And then their laughter coming back to us as we marched off.

Eventually, we arrived at the Wall, and it was an amazing sight. This structure, which was to become my prison, must rank with the greatest in the world. The temples and amphitheatres of Emerita pale into insignificance, nothing that I have heard you describe in Rome itself could match it.

It almost surprised me when we came upon it. One minute we were marching through the hilly countryside, the next we had crested the brow of a hill, and there it was. Huge, imposing, stretching over the horizon in both directions.

We marched along the military supply road which parallels the Wall, and though we kept expecting it to come to an end, it never did. Every mile, there was a fortification, called a milecastle, manned by a handful of soldiers. There were gates in these, and we often saw the soldiers checking the

wagons passing through, and occasionally commandeering a nice piece of fruit or loaf of bread. Since the natives were already paying a toll to pass through, there was a lot of grumbling about this, but there was nothing they could do. There is no way round the Wall.

Eventually, we arrived at the fort which was to be our permanent base, a place called Banna. This was a busy, bustling place, with soldiers, auxiliaries and regular legionaries, drilling marching, eating, sleeping, arguing and when off duty, drinking and dicing.

Banna has everything we need for life, albeit the harsh, uncomfortable one we live up here. There are dormitories, a granary with enough food to supply the garrison for a year, toilets, and a large covered basilica which serves as an exercise-hall.

I share my dormitory with a Gaul named Victrix, a huge, blonde-haired fellow with no sense of humour. When I hid a spider in one of his caligae, I thought he would beat me to a jelly. He is actually frightened of the things!

We have more recently started to get on with each other better, though. He is a bit slow, and I have been helping him with the Latin in his letters to and from home. In return he has done good service protecting me from the bullying which seems to dog the lives of many new recruits.

I have now had a month of training and abuse by the decurions and centurions, and am due to join the duty list for manning the milecastles. It will be nice to be on proper army business, but I fear life will be even harder.

I will write again soon. Convey my love to Claudia.

Two days before the Nones of December

My dearest Flavianus,

Thank you for your most recent letter. Emerita still seems quiet. I was pleased that Claudia sent a message of love with you. Her last letter to me seemed somewhat distant, not as full of the familiarities and intimacies with which she normally writes. I do miss her. The women here are so rude and uncultured. There is an occasional pretty face, but with no sense of proper hairstyle, make-up or dress. I have availed myself of their company only infrequently. They are nothing to Claudia.

I am now sequestered to a milecastle called Poltross Burn, where, with thirty-one other auxiliaries, I control a border crossing. To sum it up in one word? Cold. In the autumn it rained a lot. Now it rains and snows. The high ground is permanently white, and the wind blows relentlessly through the cracks in the walls.

There are advantages. We supplement our income by putting an additional tax onto what the locals and merchants have to pay to pass through. They complain, but what choice do they have?

Victrix is here, too, and we still share a dormitory, though with two others. Amazingly, these forts are designed to house twice as many; that would be very crowded. Victrix too has a girl waiting at home. We both dream of marriage, but unless the army discharges us early, we may have to wait out

our 25 years of service. I'm sure Claudia will keep herself for me, though. Our love is strong.

Next week I am going to Carlisle, to spend some of my savings. Hopefully, some strong wine and a warm girl will heat my bones.

Aemilianus

Kalends of Martius

My dearest Flavianus,

Thank you for your last letter. Are you sure Claudia still sends her love? Her last letter was very cold. She seemed to have the idea that I had forgotten her, and was losing myself in wining and women. I don't know who could have told her that.

It's still cold, although not as bad as midwinter. The surgeons were busy then, taking off frost-bitten fingers and toes. Victrix, who is used to cold weather, showed me how to keep the blood flowing, and what to avoid touching, such as the iron of the gladius, which seems to suck the heat out of your fingers. There were numerous times, though, when my extremities were numb, and forgetting decorum, Victrix and I would cuddle up close to share our body heat.

Last month we had some excitement. The Celts from the north sent a small raiding party down, burnt a couple of farms and rounded up some sheep and cattle. Alerted by the smoke, our commander sent a century of us out. They were trying to storm a milecastle, about fifty of them, and were being held off by about twenty Romans in the fort. We descended on them and slaughtered them. I wounded one, fatally I think, since it was a chest wound, but I did not have the heart to finish it. It was Victrix who administered the death blow.

We took the sheep back with us, and ate mutton for a week.

Please convey my love to Claudia, and assure her that there is no other who has my heart.

Aemilianus

Ides of Julius

Flavianus

How could you? You know what Claudia meant to me. And I counted you a friend. Claudia has obviously lowered her standards, to prefer you, a freedman and a steward's clerk, to me, a Roman auxiliary and future Roman citizen. To say it was unfair to make her wait for me is absurd. She made no comment about my leaving when I informed her of it.

I now plan to settle in Britannia, and find myself a wife here. The women are, after all, more naturally beautiful than Roman women, who have to hide behind all that decoration. And Victrix is a truer friend than you ever were.

This will be my last letter to you, Flavianus. I wish you and Claudia well in your future together.

Aemilianus

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