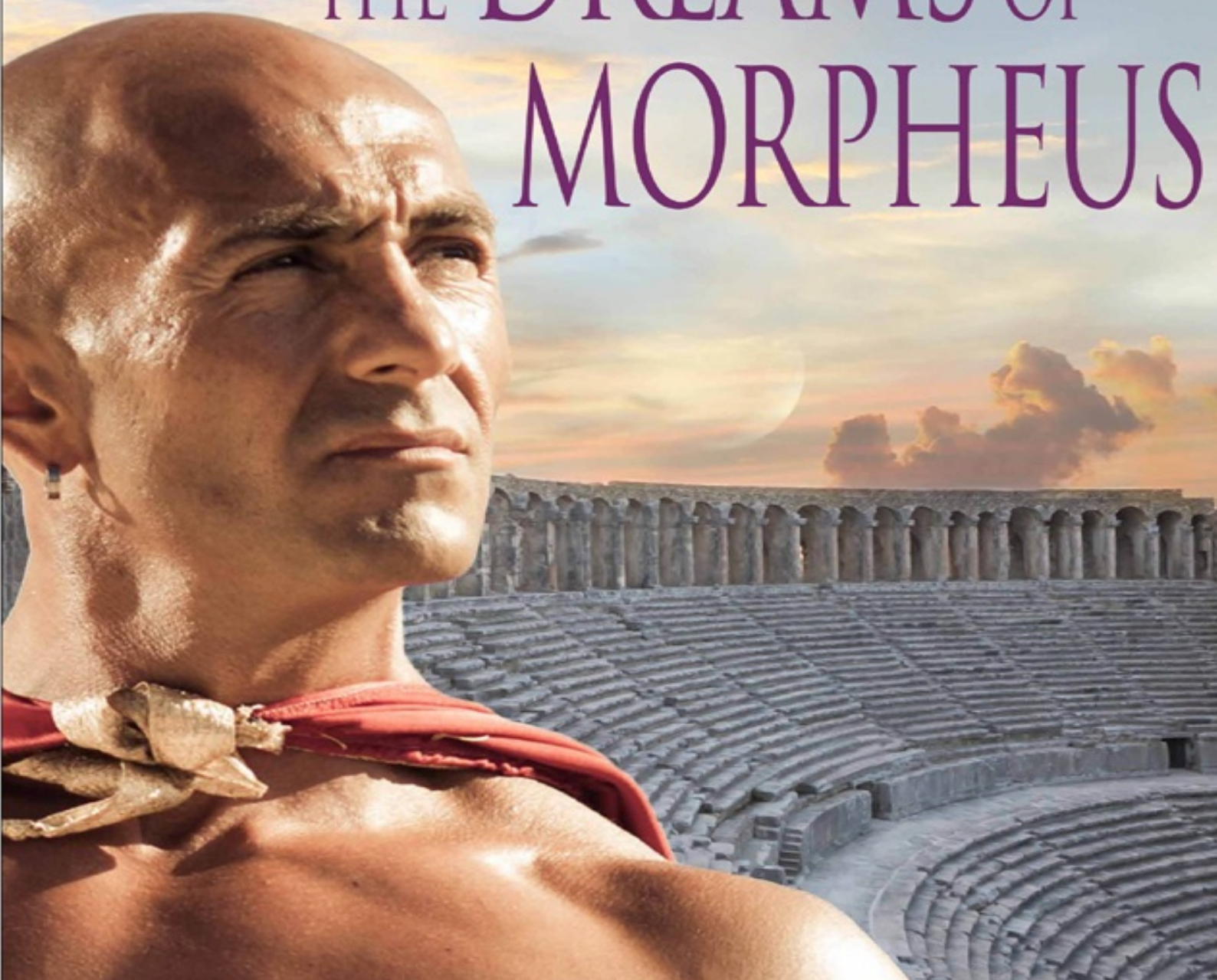


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[Ostia and Rome, October AD 34](#)

WITH THE SUDDEN, harsh rasp of flint striking iron, a cascade of sparks penetrated the thick gloom, falling, like a shooting-star shower in miniature, into a tinderbox. A quick series of soot-laden exhalations to encourage the dry shreds of cloth and fine woodchippings to start smouldering were successful and soon a tiny flame illumined the scarred, ex-boxer's face of Marcus Salvius Magnus.

One of his two companions, an ox-like man whose shaven head was sheened in sweat, reflecting the tinder's weak glow, handed Magnus a small earthenware lamp.

Magnus held the oil-soaked wick to his flame and in an instant the lamp flickered alight but its radiance failed to reach the walls or the ceiling of the cavernous chamber filled with dark piles of imported goods, other than the corner in which they were standing. Exotic smells of eastern origin pervaded the warehouse's dry, warm atmosphere. 'Thanks, Sextus.'

Magnus listened for a few moments to the constant drone of shouts, laughter, orders, thumping and grinding that came from the harbour of the port of Ostia, just the other side of the building's iron-reinforced wooden double-doors. Satisfied that their presence was undetected, he kept his voice low as he touched his flame to both of his companions' lamps. 'All right, lads, keep the lamps away from the main doors so the guards outside don't see a flicker; keep very quiet and let's find what we came for as quickly as possible. Cassandros, you take the left. I'll do the centre and, Sextus, you search the right-hand side.'

As he stood facing Magnus, Sextus looked at his hands and attempted to work out which part of the warehouse he should be heading to; his forehead creased into a concentrated frown.

'Over there, Sextus,' Magnus hissed, pointing his lamp helpfully to his right as Cassandros moved off.

Sextus looked quizzically at his left hand and shook his head, clearly bewildered. 'Right you are, Magnus.'

'And don't forget that the things we're looking for should be wrapped in sackcloth and are thin, resinous-smelling tablets no more than a foot long and half that wide.'

'Look for tablets in sackcloth; right you are, Magnus,' Sextus rumbled, inwardly digesting his orders as he lumbered off into the gloom, his lamp throwing a Titanesque, flickering shadow of his bulk over the bare brick wall.

'Keep your voice down.' Magnus shook his head, wondering if his subordinate was up to the task and decided that if the search was unsuccessful, Sextus' area would be subjected to a rigorous second sweep. However, what Sextus lacked in brains was amply made up for in strength and loyalty, which made him a valuable member of the South Quirinal Crossroads Brotherhood of which Magnus was the *patronus* – the leader.

Magnus began searching through sacks, relying more on his sense of smell than the lamp as the warehouse was evidently the property of a merchant who specialized in the import of Eastern spices, dried fruit, honey and, of course, the objective of their break-in. As he opened yet another sack, the one containing sweet-scented cinnamon bark, Magnus cursed the debt of honour that he owed to his patron, the senator Gaius Vespasius Pollo, which had obliged him to come down to the port of Ostia, the ravenous mouth of Rome. Through that mouth passed every commodity that could be bought anywhere in the world, be it silk from a land so distant that no one was certain of its name, or vividly coloured birds that could talk and seemed to live forever, or that which Magnus now sought: the resin of an Eastern flower that could unlock the realm of Morpheus.

Just why Senator Pollo wanted this substance that was only used in medicine – and then solely by

the few who could afford exorbitant expense – and exactly why he preferred to have Magnus steal rather than purchase it on the open market, Magnus neither knew nor cared. What mattered to him was to find it, then climb back up the rope that dangled from a hole in the corner of the ceiling to leave the vicinity as soon as possible before they attracted the attention of the guards outside or of the Ostiarii Vigiles. Like their counterparts in Rome, the ex-slaves who made up the Vigiles were not known for their kindness or courtesy to thieves.

Magnus rummaged through another sack, this one containing large nuts of a sort that he was unfamiliar with. He was beginning to wonder if the senator's information was correct and the resin really was in this warehouse.

'I've found the right sack, I think,' Cassandros hissed from his side of the building. 'It certainly smells right.'

Magnus made his way over as quickly as the gloom allowed, to find Cassandros examining a collection of two dozen or so dark resinous tablets; a smile cracked his full Greek-style beard which half concealed a vicious scar on his left cheek. He held out the prize as Magnus approached. 'I reckon this must be it, brother.'

Magnus took the proffered bundle, smelt it and then pinched one of the tablets: it was hard and you could not had some give in it. 'I believe you're right, brother.'

'Are you going to try a bit to make sure?'

'Bollocks I am; I ain't ill so I ain't about to take any medicine.'

'I heard it was good fun, especially if you're enjoying a firm hard body at the same time.'

Magnus grunted as he wrapped the tablets back in the sackcloth. 'And I heard that it just took your mind off things whilst a doctor sawed your leg off. Anyway, not being Greek, I prefer my bodies soft and giving and I just happen to have one waiting for me back at our crossroads tavern. So, brother, let's get out of here as I'm keen to test just how soft and giving that body is.'

Magnus' breath came in sharp gasps as he hauled himself up the last few feet of rope to scramble through the hole in the ceiling, into the attic; he felt the strong right hand of the brother waiting there clasp his wrist. 'Thanks, Marius.' He looked through the opening they had knocked in the wall and out into the gloom of the neighbouring attic. 'Any sound from back there?'

'Nothing to worry about, Magnus.' Marius wiped the sweat from his brow with his left forearm; the stump at its end was bound with leather. 'I went back and listened at the side door and whilst I was there it was checked – Vigiles, I assume – but as it was locked they moved on.'

Magnus felt the key hanging from his belt. 'Servius did well to get the copy made.' Magnus knew that was an understatement; exactly how Servius, his counsellor and second in command of the Brotherhood, had got a copy of the only key to the side door of the end warehouse in this terrace he did not know, but acquisition and information were his areas of expertise, honed by over forty years of life in Rome's underworld. What Magnus did know was that it had not been cheap; however, Senator Pollo had financed the deal without seeming to care about the price, such was his desire for success and secrecy in this venture.

As Marius hauled Cassandros out of the hole, Magnus crawled into the next attic, holding the lantern up. Ahead, through the beams supporting the terracotta roof tiles, was another wall with a gap punched through it; a couple of rats scurried in the gloom. He looked back. 'Hurry up, Sextus.'

'Give us a hand, Marius,' Sextus quipped as he struggled to squeeze his huge frame through the hole.

'Very funny, brother. It's still another couple of months to the Saturnalia and yet you're already practising your joke.'

Sextus rumbled a deep laugh as he grabbed Marius' hand and pulled himself clear of the hole.

‘Keep it down, lads,’ Magnus hissed. ‘Pull up the sack and then replace the floor. The senator was very particular about no one noticing there has been a break-in until the theft is discovered.’

Magnus took the sack, unfastened it from the end of the rope and gave it to Sextus, pointing to the heavy tool they had used to dislodge the bricks. ‘Bring the sledgehammer as well, Sextus.’

Marius and Cassandros replaced the two wooden boards that ran between the substantial ceiling beams, leaving them unnailed for fear of making unnecessary noise.

Satisfied that the boards had been relaid and their temporary removal would go unnoticed from the warehouse below, Magnus moved on. Keeping low, he scuttled across the second attic and through the wall, then passed across a third attic to the hole in the floor at the far corner through which they had accessed the space beneath the roof. The head of the military-issue scaling ladder, used for the ascent, rested against the wall just below floor level.

‘Down you go, brother,’ he whispered as Sextus joined him, sack and sledgehammer grasped in one massive hand.

With surprising agility, Sextus descended into the dark. Magnus sent the other two brothers down before placing the two loose floorboards on their sides at the edge of the hole. Feeling for the ladder with his foot, he descended a few rungs until his head was just below the level of the floor. He pulled the two floorboards over and shifted them until one fell neatly into place with the other on top of it. Pulling the second board across the remaining gap, he descended another rung, then reached up and with his fingertips, adjusted the lie of the board until it clicked snugly into the hole.

‘Bring the ladder, brothers,’ Magnus ordered as he hit the ground. Padding over to the door, he pulled the key from his belt and slipped it into the lock, turning it with a metallic clunk that resounded off the walls with increasing volume but then was drowned by the door’s squeak as it swung open a fraction. Magnus grimaced, then peered out towards the harbour just twenty paces away to his right. Even though it was the sixth hour of the night the dockside still teemed with people, silhouetted in the light of hundreds of blazing torches as they unloaded scores of merchant ships that bobbed placidly from wooden jetties. Day and night had no meaning in Ostia. Rome’s appetite was insatiable and so, to prevent her from crying out with hunger, the business of landing her sustenance never paused, not even for a moment. He stuck his head round the door and looked left, up the street away from the harbour; no one was too close. Opposite was another door in a brick wall; the mirror image ended another terrace of warehouses. After a further quick glance right, he threw the door wide open. ‘Quick, lads, but don’t run, it’ll draw attention to us.’ He stood back so that his brothers could file through and then stepped out into the street, closing and locking the door behind him.

Walking swiftly, Magnus followed his companions left and then right into the street running behind the warehouses. Parallel with the harbour, it was lit only by the dim light oozing from open-fronted taverns and peopled by shadows. Drunken cries and raucous singing echoed up the high walls and the aroma of grilled meat mingled with those of sweat, urine and rotting refuse. Halfway to its end Magnus paused; a group of eight men in silhouette had turned into the street and were marching in two columns up the raised pavement towards him. ‘Shit! We can’t turn round. It would be too obvious. What do you brazen it out if we’re stopped, all right, lads?’

The brothers mumbled their agreement and followed their leader towards the representatives of the only real law enforcement in Ostia.

Magnus came to a set of three stones set in the road, placed there so that pedestrians could cross to the other side without soiling their feet, and positioned so that carts could still pass between them. ‘Marius and Cassandros, drop the ladder and stay on this side. Sextus, follow me.’ He crossed the street with Sextus carrying the sack as the Vigiles’ optio noticed the ladder discarded by Marius and Cassandros. ‘Don’t look back, Sextus.’ Magnus increased his pace as he heard the optio order his brothers across the street to halt and explain just why they had abandoned a perfectly good military

scaling ladder at the sight of him and his men.

Magnus barged through a group of carousing sailors who thought better of taking exception to his manners at the sight of Sextus bearing down on them with a sledgehammer in his hand.

Then there came the sudden shout that he was dreading: 'Halt!'

Magnus walked even faster.

'You! Big man with the sack and your mate, halt!'

Magnus glanced round to see four of the Vigiles break into a run, heading towards him across the stepping stones, pulling their heavy cudgels from their belts whilst their comrades chased after them. Cassandros and Marius, who had used the distraction to hare off in the opposite direction. 'Run!' He sprinted away with Sextus in train, barrelling down the pavement regardless of other users who, in the main, ended up sprawled in the filth on the road.

Racing down the street, Magnus felt his chest tighten with every urgent pace and became horribly aware of his forty-four years. Very few of his brothers were under forty, most having served the twenty-five years under the Eagles or, as in Marius' case, in the navy. He threw another look over his shoulder and saw that the much younger Vigiles were gaining. 'We'll have to turn and fight them with Sextus.' He looked up and saw the end of the street. 'You go left and then turn straight back at them. I'll go right.'

Sextus nodded, frowning, looking at the sack in one hand and the sledgehammer in the other as he pounded along.

'That way,' Magnus shouted, pointing to the left. He hurtled right, round the corner, then immediately turned and, putting his shoulder down, ran back to it as two of the Vigiles charged round. With a crack of ribs and a stunted grunt, Magnus' shoulder rammed into one of his pursuers' chest, catapulting him back and felling him like a sacrificed beast. The other man sprinted on a few more paces before realising what had happened; he stopped and turned. But Magnus was ready for him and snatched at his right wrist as the Vigile raised his club. Holding it in an iron grasp, he forced it down and round. The Vigile's breath puffed warm on Magnus' face, wine and onion clinging to it, as the man was slowly forced down. His left hand lashed out at Magnus, cracking a tight-fisted punch into his cheekbone that caused light to flash across his eyes and his grip to loosen just enough for the Vigile to raise his arm a fraction. Realising that in a protracted trial of strength the younger man would get the better of him, Magnus jerked his knee up into his genitals and felt the satisfying squash of a testicle. The wind fled from his opponent as his eyes popped and his mouth opened in a silent scream; his legs buckled and he collapsed to the ground, clutching his groin. Allowing himself one stout kick at the man's face as he passed, Magnus picked up his cudgel and ran on to where Sextus was grappling with his second assailant; the first lay staring sightlessly at the night sky, his mouth and nose pulverised by a huge blow from the sledgehammer.

Without pausing in his stride, Magnus slammed the heavy club over the back of Sextus' opponent's head and felt the skull crack; the man went limp in Sextus' arms.

'Time to go, Sextus, my lad,' Magnus shouted as he picked up the sack and pelted towards the crowded port.

'Magnus!' Gaius Vespasius Pollo boomed, looking up from the breakfast he was obviously enjoying next to the log fire crackling in the hearth of his atrium. He did not rise but indicated with a chubbily-beringed hand that Magnus should take the chair opposite. 'You were successful, I trust?' He placed half a hard-boiled egg into his mouth and chewed vigorously, causing his jowls and chins to wobble.

Magnus handed his cloak to the young, blond doorkeeper and crossed the dimly lit atrium; the first signs of dawn could be seen in the courtyard garden through the window. 'We were, senator.' He sat accepting a cup of warm, watered wine from another very attractive Germanic-looking slave boy.

‘You’ve not brought it with you, have you?’

‘Of course not, sir.’ Magnus took a slug of his drink. ‘I left it at the Brotherhood tavern. I stopped there before coming over to you for a bit of er ... refreshment, if you take my meaning?’

Gaius chuckled and cast an admiring eye at the boy waiting on them. ‘I’m sure I do. How many tablets were there?’

‘A couple of dozen.’

‘More than expected; I assume you’ve kept a little something for yourself as commission?’

‘Just the one tablet.’

‘A fair price; but don’t let it be known.’ Gaius pulled a ringlet of carefully tonged dyed-black hair from in front of his eyes and fixed Magnus with a hard stare. ‘Were you seen?’

Magnus placed his cup down on the table between them. ‘Yes and no. We were challenged but only after we left the warehouse; all the lads got away – just. One lad was a bit too enthusiastic with his hammer and brought about an early demise to one of the Vigiles; but that might turn out to be a good thing.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, we left no sign of a break-in so the prefect of Ostia will only be concerned with who sent one of his ex-slave thugs to meet the Ferryman.’

‘Yes, but it would have been better to have had no fuss at all.’

‘Granted, but when the theft is noticed, if the owner reports it to the authorities, they’ll be too busy looking for a Vigiles murderer to care that much.’

Gaius raised a finely plucked eyebrow and slipped an olive between his moist lips. ‘I very much doubt that; not when they realise who the owner is.’

Magnus felt his insides lurch. ‘You said that it was no one important.’

‘Well, he’s not – in terms of Roman politics, that is. However, he does have some influential friends in the imperial household.’

‘Who is he?’

‘The Jewish Prince, Herod Agrippa.’

‘I heard that he’d fled Rome because of debt.’

‘He came back just recently; he managed to organise a very successful embassy of Parthian dissidents, which got him back in favour but not out of debt. The Emperor Tiberius rewarded him by making him tutor to his grandson, Tiberius Gemellus. So, in case the prefect takes a highly placed complaint of theft seriously and on the outside chance that you or one of your lads was recognised, suggest you move the tablets out of your place to somewhere less obvious.’

Magnus downed the rest of his cup and held it out to be replenished. ‘Can’t you just dispose of them?’

‘I’m afraid not, Magnus; not yet. But I’ll send a message soon, telling you what I want done with them.’ Gaius heaved his massive bulk up from the chair, his tunic straining to contain copious folds of flesh, and stood whilst a third slave boy – equally as pretty – began draping his toga about him. ‘Now I must greet the rest of my clients and then I’ve an appointment to see the Lady Antonia before I go to the Senate.’

‘She’s wanting a favour?’

‘No, I need her to return one. I’m hoping that as sister-in-law to Tiberius she can persuade him to grant my nephew, Vespasian, a travel permit to Egypt so that he can do some business there on his way back from Cyrenaica, once he’s finished his year as quaestor. As you know, senators are forbidden to enter that bounteous province without the Emperor’s permission and he doesn’t give that too easily.’

‘You’ll need to have done something very substantial for her to get that.’

Gaius smiled; his face aglow with firelight. 'I already have, thanks to you, Magnus. What you stole was the very generous commission that Herod Agrippa received from the dissident Parthians for brokering their embassy. Antonia is going to sell it to recoup some of the considerable debt that she still owes her. You may find she's in such a good mood that you'll get a summons.'

'Marcus Salvius Magnus, we have come to you because we hope that as the leader of the Crossroads Brotherhood in our quarter you can right the wrong that is being perpetrated on us.' The speaker was Duilius, an older man in his fifties, whom Magnus knew to be conscientious with his monthly payments to the Brotherhood in return for their protection of his sandal and belt business near the Porta Collina, paused and spread his hands towards Magnus in supplication.

Magnus looked at the crowd of shopkeepers, traders, residents and businessmen before him, all from the South Quirinal. There were a lot of them, more than could fit into the room behind the tavern that he normally used for such meetings; hence they were grouped round the rough tables set outside at the apex of the acute junction between the Alta Semita and the Vicus Longus, both busy with morning trade. Such a large deputation could only mean one thing: it was a serious problem and he would have to solve it for them or lose considerable face, maybe even his position – or perhaps his life.

Magnus felt Servius shift his weight on the bench next to him.

'Do you speak for everyone, Duilius?' his counsellor asked, rubbing the loose wrinkled skin at his throat with claw-like hands.

'I do.'

'Then shall we three retire inside and discuss the matter in more comfort?'

'No, Servius; all should witness the conversation.'

Magnus glanced at his counsellor; his rheumy eyes confirmed that this was indeed a serious problem that could not be ignored. He looked back at the delegation, steepled his hands and, leaning forward over the table, pressed them to his lips. 'Speak, Duilius.'

'For the last month or so we have been in receipt of short measures from the grain dole. We are entitled every market interval to one modius of grain per citizen, which normally fills a tub this big. He illustrated with his hands a tub about one foot across and not quite as tall. 'However, recently the dole has often been one sextarius short; not all the time, you understand, but a significant amount since we noticed and started checking.'

Magnus could see where this was going and he did not like it: he was headed for a clash with someone from the senatorial class. 'You're claiming that the aedile for this area is cheating you out of a sixteenth of your dole?'

'Yes, Magnus. We think that he's had some of the modius measures made smaller because the public slaves who distribute the grain still fill them all to the brim – and yet sometimes the measure is short. We know from acquaintances working in the granaries here in Rome and at Ostia that the stocks are dwindling and, until the first Egyptian grain fleet arrives next year, we are heading for a shortage which always means higher prices. We believe that Publius Aufidius Brutus is skimming off the top of our dole and hoarding it for himself so as to sell it when the price inflates next year.'

Magnus nodded, able to see the logic in the aedile's scheme; if it were true that Rome was heading for a shortage there would be fortunes to make in speculation.

'Is this happening in other areas?' Servius asked.

'Does it matter? The fact is that it's happening here, to us.'

Magnus turned to look at Servius. 'Have any of the lads mentioned this to you?'

'No, but if Brutus is clever, as I'm sure he is, then he wouldn't try to cheat anyone that he knew was a member of the Brotherhood; he'll make sure that the altered measures are only used at certain distribution points.'

Magnus grunted. ‘Well, he ain’t that clever; if he pisses off our people he pisses us off too.’

‘I imagine he will try to reach some sort of arrangement with us.’

Duilius cleared his throat. ‘That’s what we thought he would do, try to buy you off with a small percentage of the huge profit that he’s liable to make, then you and he will leave us to suffer.’

Magnus’ eyes hardened as he stood, almost pushing the bench over and Servius with it. ‘We take your money for two reasons, Duilius.’ He pointed to the altar of the Crossroads Lares embedded in the tavern’s walls; a flame burnt there constantly, tended by one of the brothers in turn. ‘First, to help service our sacred duty to the deities of this area, for the good of the whole community. Second, to protect you from outside interference. If you are being ripped off, then we will see justice done and you will not be bought off by the perpetrator, whomever it is – even if he comes from a family that has held the consulship. Do you understand me, Duilius? If I ever hear you questioning my honesty again things may not go so well for a few of your slaves and then how would your business be, if you take no meaning?’

Duilius held his hands up. ‘Forgive me, patronus; I didn’t mean to imply that you would take the bribe. I just meant that I thought you would be offered one.’

Magnus sat back down. ‘Very well.’ He looked round the crowd. ‘Is there anything else?’ There were negative murmurs and shakes of heads. ‘I’ll work out a way of having a private chat with Publius Aufidius Brutus and try to impress upon him the need to desist in this matter.’

‘We want more than that, Magnus,’ Duilius said. ‘We want him to return the grain he has already cheated us out of, or the cash equivalent.’

Knowing the greed of the senatorial classes in Rome – in fact, of all the classes in the city – Magnus felt that would be nigh on impossible; but to say so before he had even tried would be construed as weak. ‘Very well. I suggest you all go about your business now as you must have much to do.’ Magnus ran his fingers through his greying hair as the crowd dispersed and then turned to Servius. ‘Have Terentius come and see me at the eighth hour.’

Servius frowned. ‘What use is a whore-boy master in a business like this?’

‘It’s about the other current issue.’ Magnus got to his feet, shaking his head. ‘How do I put pressure on an aedile if he ignores my warning, as I suspect he will?’

‘Senator Pollo owes us for last night; perhaps he can exert some influence?’ Servius suggested following Magnus back into the tavern.

‘I doubt it.’ Magnus headed for his table in the corner with a good view of the door; the few early morning drinkers made way for him and Servius. Cassandros stepped out from behind the amphora-lined bar to place a full jug of wine and two cups on the table as they sat. ‘Senators don’t like to be squeezed one another unless it’s at least partly for their own personal gain. Of course I’ll ask the senator but I guarantee he’ll say that he has no influence over Brutus, which means that he has nothing to gain by it.’

Servius pushed a full cup across the table. ‘Then let’s find a way to make Brutus’ humiliation of value to our tame senator. I believe his elder nephew, Sabinus, has managed to get himself elected as one of the aediles for next year.’

Magnus froze in the act of putting the cup to his mouth; he thought for a moment, then smiled and pointed his index finger at his counsellor. ‘Now that, my old friend, is deep thinking.’

Magnus heaved his way through the crowds in Caesar’s Forum with Marius and Sextus to either side of him; all three wore their plain white citizens’ togas. None of them spoke as they negotiated their passage through the milling citizenry listening to a case in an open-air law court, or petitioning the Urban Prefect or one of the lesser magistrates who carried out the city’s public business every day under the great equestrian statue of the former dictator that dominated his forum.

As they approached the magistrates presiding beneath the Divine Julius, Magnus glimpsed a young man in a senatorial toga, seated at a desk; his almost black hair was oiled and combed forward from the back of his head as if covering premature balding. Magnus stopped to look more closely. 'There's our boy, lads.'

'He looks very pleased with himself,' Marius commented as Brutus stood and grinned, grasping the forearm of an Easterner in a white headdress, and slapping his shoulder before taking a scroll from him.

'Business always brings a smile to *my* face, brother.' Magnus moved forward as the Urban Prefect joined Brutus and his Eastern associate, dispensing back slaps and toothy smiles all round.

'They must be doing a lot of business to be that happy,' Sextus observed in his slow manner.

Magnus waited until the Easterner had moved off and Brutus had sat down, unrolling the scroll before walking up to him. 'Aedile?'

Brutus looked up from the scroll. 'Mmm. Oh, it's you; Magnus, isn't it?'

'You know perfectly well that's my name, aedile.'

'I don't like your tone.'

'I'm not asking you to like it; I'm asking you to listen to what I have to say.'

Brutus sighed. 'You have a right to approach your magistrate; I'm listening.'

'The people of my area believe they are being given short measures at the grain dole.'

'Do they now?' Brutus wrinkled his nose. 'And what makes them *believe* that?'

'They've checked what they receive against what they know to be the correct measurement and they want me to ask you to look into it.'

'I've heard from my sources that a nasty little specimen by the name of Duilius is stirring people up; no doubt it was he who asked you to come here. Well, you've asked me and I can assure you that they are wrong.' Brutus leant closer to Magnus. 'Perhaps, for a small consideration every month to your Brotherhood's coffers, you could reassure Duilius and his friends for me?'

'I'm afraid that won't be possible, aedile; that is exactly what my people expect to happen. And it is out of consideration for your well-being that I would ask you again to look into the matter.'

'Are you threatening me, Magnus?'

'Not at all, aedile; it's just that I wouldn't like to be responsible for your safety walking in an area where the people may have an unfounded grudge against you.'

Brutus scoffed. 'The people know their place; they would never dare lay hands on an elected magistrate.'

'So that's a refusal then?'

'There is nothing for me to refuse; the measures all conform to imperial standards and they all have the imperial stamp on them to prove that.'

Magnus held the aedile's look for a good few moments; neither blinked. 'Thank you for your time, aedile.'

Brutus sniffed and returned to reading his scroll.

'What will you do now, Magnus?' Marius asked as they negotiated a path towards the Senate House in the Forum Romanum.

'Tempt a senator into doing what we want by dangling the chance of patronage in front of him.'

The steps to the Senate House were relatively deserted compared to the bustle of Caesar's Forum behind it. Magnus glanced around at the few senators either on their way in or out of the ancient heart of government of the Roman world. The doors were open so that the Conscript Fathers could be seen at their deliberations by the populace; it was barely an eighth full. 'We'll have to wait, lads; he'll be out soon.'

‘Magnus, I could no more ask that of the Urban Prefect,’ Gaius confided, ‘than invite him for a cosy dinner for two and some fun afterwards with my Germanic boys; it would be presumptuous.’

Magnus walked alongside his patron as Sextus and Marius cleared the way for them. ‘I understand that, sir; but if it were to come to his attention that this problem is potentially the cause of serious unrest that could result in him appearing ineffective to the Emperor, then perhaps he would consent to your suggestion in the Senate to order an examination of every modius measure used in the grain dole.’

‘Even so, my friend, what would there be in it for me in having Cossus Cornelius Lentulus expose Brutus, other than earning Brutus’ and his family’s enmity?’

‘If every measure in Rome is checked and not just the Quirinal, then Brutus will have no cause to suspect that your recommendation was targeting him.’

‘But I’ll have made myself conspicuous for no personal gain. They’re a consular family, you know.’

‘If the Urban Prefect uncovers a scam that’s been defrauding a section of the population from their rightful privilege, then the popularity he would gain could reflect well on the Emperor who has appointed him. I’m sure that Tiberius likes to have the people well looked after; and, since he no longer spends all his time on Capraea, he’ll be very pleased with Lentulus for doing such a good job in his absence. That would ensure Lentulus a long tenure of his very lucrative position; he’d be in your debt. Now, I believe that Sabinus is one of the aediles elected for next year ...’ Magnus let his voice trail off.

Gaius licked his already moist lips as he made the connection. ‘Whose duties are allocated by the Urban Prefect. Lentulus would be particularly well disposed to my family if I had helped him uncover such a wicked fraud on his beloved populace.’

Magnus nodded, his face composed into the most solemn and understanding of expressions. ‘Indeed, senator; the people whom he lives to serve deprived of the bread of life in such a callous manner, and thanks to your help he could right that wrong. He’ll look at you with tears of gratitude welling up in his eyes.’

‘I’m sure in that condition he would be willing to grant me the smallest of requests and give Sabinus the most prestigious of all the aedile posts; working with the prefect of the Grain Supply would really bring public attention to him and the whole family.’

‘I think it would be the least that Lentulus could do. I believe you would find your credit with him wouldn’t be exhausted for some time and that would far outweigh any enmity from a humiliated aedile, even if he does come from a consular family.’

Gaius slipped a pudgy arm round Magnus’ shoulders. ‘And I believe you may be right, my friend. But tell me, how will you make this issue a potential cause for unrest in order for Lentulus to take it seriously? Riots on the Quirinal might bring a heavyhanded response from the prefect and his Urban Cohorts.’

‘My thoughts entirely.’

‘So?’

‘Well, it’s occurred to me that on the Ides of October, in two days’ time, an official public brawl is scheduled. It would be a shame if everything started to get out of hand as the residents of the Subura fight the residents of the Via Sacra for possession of the severed head of the October Horse.’

‘You asked to see me, Marcus Salvius Magnus.’

The soft voice just cut through the background chatter in the tavern; Magnus disengaged himself from the plump young whore sitting on his lap and looked up at his visitor and smiled. ‘Yes, Terentius.’ He removed the whore’s hand from under his tunic, adjusted his dress and sent her on her way with a satisfying slap on her buttocks before returning his attention to his visitor. ‘Sit down.’

As he sat, Terentius ran his hands down the back of his thighs to control his tunic which was unbelted, like a woman's. He crossed his legs with studied elegance and with a modest smile accepted the cup of wine that Magnus proffered. 'Thank you, Magnus.'

'You're looking good, Terentius.'

Terentius pulled back an errant lock of long, auburn hair, which had come loose from the ponytail into which it was tied, and secured it behind his ear. 'Thank you, Magnus; I try my best.'

Magnus could see that he did. Although he was now in his forties, the whore-boy master certainly looked after his appearance: the pale skin over his high cheekbones remained smooth, his chin and neck were still taut, his lips full and subtly painted and his large eyes bright and interested, despite the life that he had led as first a whore and now a master. *Very nice*, was always Magnus' immediate thought; closely followed by: *if you like that sort of thing*.

Magnus leant across the table. 'How's business?'

'It's very good.' Terentius took a sip before adding, with a raised eyebrow, 'But not good enough to justify an increase in what I pay to the Brotherhood.'

Magnus leant back, laughing, then reached across and laid a hand on Terentius' arm. 'Very good, take your meaning, old friend. In lieu of that rise I need a favour.'

'Anything for you, Magnus.'

'Yeah, I'm sure. Well, I need something kept safe and secret for a few days.'

With a slight incline of the head, Terentius acquiesced.

'Servius has it out the back; go and find him and he'll have a couple of the lads escort you home.'

Terentius took another sip, placed his cup down and then stood. 'I'll hear from you shortly then?'

'You will.'

Terentius smiled as he turned to go.

Magnus held up a hand. 'Oh, one thing. Have you or your boys been having any trouble with short measures on the grain dole recently?'

'No, Magnus.'

'Any trouble with our local aedile?'

Terentius pouted and shook his head. 'No, Magnus. I make sure that he's very well disposed towards me; I give him free use of my establishment a couple of times a month.'

'Do you now?'

'Oh yes, it always pays to look after those who have power over you; you know that the offer is always open to you too.'

As Terentius walked away, Magnus' gaze lingered on him for just a moment too long for his own liking. He shook his head then looked around for the whore, feeling an urgent need to take her upstairs to the small room that he called home.

Thin, pale fingers of dawn poked through the window shutters as the constant clamour from the street below impinged once more on Magnus' consciousness, hauling it from the realm of dreams.

He lay in the half-light, looking up at the roughly cut ceiling beams, listening to the whore's soft breaths and running through in his mind what he needed to achieve in the next two days; the list was not long but it was tricky.

Once satisfied, he turned his attention to the business of his patron, Senator Pollo, pleased that he had helped to boost his patron's standing with the most powerful woman in Rome, the Lady Antonia.

He was acquainted with Antonia, surprisingly given the vast social gulf between them, but unsurprisingly given her enjoyment for boxing and her penchant for a private round with the after-dinner-spectacle winner once her guests had departed. But that had been ten years or more ago when he had made his living that way after completing his time first in Rome's legions, and then getting

lucky transfer to the Urban Cohorts which meant he only had to serve sixteen years and not the full twenty-five. Once he had fought his way to the position of patronus of his Brotherhood, using the substantial prize money that he had earned in his two years of gruelling, iron-fisted bouts, he had left the profession and the lady behind. Until, that was, their paths had crossed again after his patron, Senator Pollo, and his nephews, Sabinus and Vespasian, had risen in her favour. Now she summoned him as the fancy took her and because of her status he would be a fool to refuse; he grimaced at himself at the thought of a new summons as she was not getting any younger. He wondered how and to whom she would sell the tablets, and when Senator Pollo would require him to pick them up from Terentius and ... At the thought of Terentius he turned the whore over, putting him to the back of his mind.

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‘Magnus! you get prettier by the year.’

‘And you get slimmer by the year, Aetius.’ Magnus grasped his old comrade’s forearm and felt the giving flesh where there once had been taut muscle. ‘Standards are really dropping in the Urban Cohorts if they allow figures like yours to parade under their banners.’

Aetius threw his bald head back and laughed, placing one hand on his ample belly. ‘I haven’t stood underneath a banner since they stopped making mail tunics that fitted me which, as quartermaster for the cohorts, was easy to organise.’ He swept his arm round his large, well-appointed office complete with mobile braziers, clerks and an oak desk of vulgar proportions. ‘When I re-enlisted for a further sixteen years I did so with a nice cosy and lucrative time in the stores in mind and none of the running up and down that the centurions seem so keen on.’

‘Quite right, old friend; all that running prevents a man from cultivating a decent paunch.’

Aetius gave Magnus a playful punch to the stomach. ‘Still firm; you must be doing a lot of running.’

‘Horizontally, Aetius, horizontally.’

‘I’m sure. But what can I do for you? I can’t recall being in your debt.’

‘You’re not; but how would you like me to be in yours?’

‘That, Magnus, would help me to sleep much easier at nights.’

Magnus pointed to his ear and indicated that Aetius should follow him outside away from any eavesdroppers.

They walked out into the bright sunshine of an early autumnal day and crossed the courtyard of the Urban Cohorts’ newly constructed stores warehouse near the Tiber; the previous one having burnt down eight years before with, unfortunately, Aetius’ inventories and everything within. The fire had been a useful diversion for Magnus and his brothers who had business on the other side of the city and preferred to transact it without the interference of the Vigiles, whose main duty was firefighting. Convenient though it was for the Brotherhood it was a sad loss for the Urban Cohorts. However, having had plenty of warning of the blaze, in that it was Aetius himself who had set it at Magnus’ request, Magnus was very confident that not much of value had remained for the flames – apart from the precious inventories, that was.

They turned left out of the gate in order to avoid the reek of the tanneries along the riverbank. Sextus and Marius, who had been waiting outside, followed at a discreet distance.

As they entered the open space of the Forum Boarium in the shadow of the Circus Maximus Magnus put an arm round his old comrade’s shoulders. ‘What’s the difference between a civil modius measure and a military one?’

‘Not much; both are bronze and both have the inscription acknowledging imperial regulation of weights and measures. The only difference would be that a military one has the legion, cohort and

century to which it has been issued engraved upon it.’

‘But if it hasn’t been issued?’

‘Then it wouldn’t have a military engraving on it.’

‘That’s what I thought. I’ll take a dozen.’

‘A dozen? But these things are tightly regulated; they remain the property of the Emperor. They have to be signed in and out.’

‘I wasn’t for a moment thinking of having the Emperor’s. That could get us into serious trouble; I was planning to have yours.’

‘Mine?’

‘Yes, why not?’ Magnus’ grip tightened round Aetius’ shoulders. ‘I imagine quite a few were sadly destroyed in that fire all those years ago; I just want a dozen of them.’

‘I’ve only got half a dozen left.’

‘They’ll have to do then. How would you make them one sextius short?’

‘Put a false bottom in, of course.’

‘How long will that take?’

‘I’ve got a man who could do all six in a day, no questions asked.’

‘You sound confident.’

‘He’s done it before.’

Magnus stopped. ‘When?’

‘A couple of months ago.’

‘Who for?’

Aetius shrugged. ‘I don’t know; the deal was through a series of intermediaries. I only do business face to face with a very few trusted associates like yourself. There’s no way that I can find out who he was, Magnus, unless I jeopardise my anonymity and reputation for discretion.’

‘You don’t need to, my friend. Have the measures delivered tomorrow morning at the latest, but tell your man not to make too good a job of the false bottoms; I need them to be visible.’

‘They’re never exact.’

‘Good.’

Aetius rubbed his thumb against his fingers. ‘And what about, you know.’

Magnus slapped his back. ‘Aetius, I believe that your second sixteen years are up very soon and I don’t suppose they’ll have you back.’

‘No, I suspect you’re right.’

‘So you’ll be looking for a safe area from which you can operate discreetly and unmolested?’

Aetius grinned, displaying yellowing teeth. ‘Somewhere I can sleep easy at nights?’

‘My friend, everyone in the South Quirinal sleeps easy at night.’

It was almost the sixth hour of the day by the time that Magnus, Sextus and Marius reached the baths of Agrippa; but this was a perfect time to run into, as if by accident, the sort of people Magnus needed to see. For all those in the city who followed a regular work pattern, be it trade or political, their working day ran from the first hour to the eighth or ninth. After that there was time to relax before the main meal of the day towards the end of the afternoon. Consequently, after the eighth hour, the baths filled up with a different kind of clientele from those who frequented them earlier in the day. But it was the early arrivals that Magnus wanted to mingle with: the men who did not have a regular working pattern, men who did not do physical trade or politics but, rather, men who dealt in other commodities, the same commodities that Magnus dealt in – fear and protection. Men who could afford to while away the morning in the comforts of Rome’s public baths.

Having stripped and handed their clothes to one of the many slaves in the vestibule for safekeeping

and received linen towels in return, Magnus led his brothers into the main hall of the baths where men exercised, relaxed, received massages, had their body hair removed and muscles massaged, or just strolled about chatting, scheming or gossiping.

‘Have a wander round and keep your eyes out for any members of the Suburra or Via Sacra Brotherhoods, lads,’ Magnus muttered as he looked around the throng. ‘No pointing, I just want to know who’s here and where they are.’

Magnus spread his towel on a leather upholstered couch and settled down to a shoulder massage from one of the many public slaves, while his brothers circulated through the high-domed hall that echoed back, with sharp clarity, the sound of hundreds of voices.

It was after too short a time of oiling, pummelling and kneading that Marius and Sextus returned.

‘Well?’ Magnus asked, dismissing the slave with a wave of his hand.

‘We saw some of those thieving bastards from the Central Suburra,’ Marius reported. ‘They’ve just come out of the *fridigerium* and look to be on their way out. The scum from the eastern end of the Via Sacra are exercising over at the weight benches and—’

‘Is Dacien with them?’

‘Didn’t see him. But I did see Grumio with some of his lowlife from West Suburra heading toward the *caldrium*.’

‘Did you now.’ Magnus got to his feet, picked up the towel and stretched his shoulders with a couple of cracks. ‘Time for a sweat, I think, lads.’

Heat stung Magnus’ eyes as the heavy wooden door of the *caldarium* closed behind him; he looked around the dim interior, lit with ambient light from one small window in the wall opposite him, and saw a small group of naked men knotted round a shaven-headed, pot-bellied man of about his own age – in his early to mid-forties. Two slaves stood to either side of the group, fanning the hot air down on to them by vigorously twirling towels above their heads. All eyes in the group turned to Magnus and his two brothers as they approached. Neither party felt threatened as, by convention, there was a truce in all public baths – mainly because the only option in which a naked man could conceal a weapon was not that comfortable.

‘Grumio,’ Magnus said as he sat down on a stone bench, enjoying the warmth of it on his buttocks.

‘Magnus,’ Grumio replied, flashing gold teeth in an unconvincing smile.

A slave approached and began fanning Magnus and his brothers; the hot air beating down on them soon caused beads of sweat to prick out all over their bodies.

Magnus put his hands on his knees and lowered his head, ignoring his opposite number from the West Suburra.

Sextus grunted with pleasure with every down beat of the towel.

Marius closed his eyes and leant his head back against the wall, playing idly with the stump at the end of his left arm.

‘Word has it that you’ve got an issue with the aedile,’ Grumio said eventually. ‘I heard that you had a delegation.’

‘You heard right,’ Magnus replied without looking up.

‘Tricky situation.’

‘What’s it to you?’

‘Just making conversation.’

‘If it’s conversation that you want, then I heard that we’re heading for a grain shortage.’

‘Yes, I’ve heard that too from lads of mine in the granaries.’

‘And coincidentally the Via Sacra area is having the opposite problem to the Quirinal; they’ve got too much grain.’

‘I’d not heard that. What do you mean?’

‘Dacien at the east end of the Via Sacra and the aedile for the area have been registering false names on the dole list for the past few months.’

‘How do they do that? I’ve been trying for years.’

‘Don’t know; you’ll have to ask Dacien, who will probably deny it. But it’s a lot easier, I would assume, if you have an aedile on your side. Anyway, they have, and Dacien and the aedile are stockpiling the surplus to sell at a premium when the shortage hits in the spring before the first grain fleet arrives.’

Grumio hawked and spat. ‘They’ll make a fortune.’

‘They will; but do you want to hear the funny part?’

‘Go on.’

‘If the aedile were to be caught he’d be banished at the very least and his political career would be over. However, if Dacien were to be caught he would just slip away for a year or two and wait for all the fuss to die down.’

‘So Dacien has threatened to expose the aedile? Very sensible. What does he want?’

‘Well, quite rightly, he wants his people to be happy, so what would make them happier than the year to win the right to hang the head of the October Horse?’

‘They’ve got to fight us and the other Suburra Brotherhoods for that honour, and they hardly ever win because we outnumber them; how can the aedile fix that?’

Magnus got up and stretched. ‘As you know, I used to be in one of the Urban Cohorts and still maintain my contacts there. One of them, and I can’t say who for obvious reasons, has told me that the Via Sacra aedile has paid a substantial sum to a couple of the centurions to have their men come in on the side of the Via Sacra.’

Grumio was outraged. ‘They can’t do that. It’s always a fair fight.’

‘Of course, and they wouldn’t join in if it was just a fight; but if it had escalated into a riot?’

‘How are they going to do that?’

‘Turn it into a riot? My contact didn’t know, but I’m sure they’ll have thought of something. I’d be on your guard tomorrow if I were you, Grumio; and just remember that it was me that warned you.’

‘I will; but why did you?’

‘Let’s just say that I like to see fair play when it comes to the October Horse. It would bring bad luck to the whole city if the festival were to be meddled with.’ Magnus looked down at his brother. ‘Time to cool off, lads. Let’s leave these good gentlemen to contemplate what the Ides of October holds for them.’ With a curt nod to Grumio, he headed for the door.

‘So who told you that the cohorts were going to side with the Via Sacra?’ Sextus asked as they left the baths.

Magnus grinned and slapped his large companion on his broad back. ‘I could tell you had a question forming, brother, you’ve been chewing your lip for the last hour and frowning more than usual. Tell me, Marius.’

‘No one, brother. Magnus made it up.’

Sextus’ frown became even more furrowed. ‘How do you think of such things?’

‘Because I have to, Sextus. But just because I made it up doesn’t mean that it won’t become true, at least partially true. Marius, go and find our old friend, Centurion Nonus Manilus Rufinus, at the cohorts’ camp and tell him that I may have an interesting business proposition for him.’

‘So what’s in it for me?’ Centurion Nonus Manilus Rufinus asked, leaning forward over the table in the private room behind the tavern that Magnus used for business. ‘If I have my men form up as

they are going to charge the Suburra factions in the fight it'll cause a riot. There'll be a lot of damage and quite a few questions asked; so it has to be worth my while.'

'A noble sentiment, Rufinus.' Magnus walked over to a strongbox in the far corner and slipped a key into the lock. With a dull click the lock turned; Magnus reached in and pulled out a thin, sackcloth-wrapped parcel. 'I think you'll find that this will make it worth your while.' He placed it on the table and unwrapped it to reveal a tablet of dark resin. Taking his knife from its sheath, he cut it in half and pushed a chunk over to Rufinus.

Rufinus stared at it for a few moments. 'What is it?'

'That, my good friend, is worth more than gold.'

'Yes, but what is it?'

'The key to the realm of Morpheus. It's a resin from an eastern flower that transports you to another place. Doctors use it to dull the pain when they're operating; but only on their rich clients because it's very rare. Hardly any makes it into the empire and it's very sought after by the medical profession.'

'How much is that worth?'

'As I said: more than its weight in gold – if you know where to sell it. My guess is that the Praetorian Guard or Urban Cohorts' doctors would be very interested, or perhaps the doctors favoured by the Senate.'

Rufinus picked it up and felt the weight of it in his hand; he whistled softly. 'Magnus, my friend, always it's a pleasure doing business with you.'

Magnus ripped the sackcloth in half and handed a bit to Rufinus to wrap his resin in. 'Let the fight build up a bit and then threaten as if to join in against the Suburra, but do not make the move. That should be enough to make them attack you and then after that it becomes self-defence.'

Rufinus stuffed his half-tablet down his tunic. 'What if I'm asked why I formed up against the Suburra?'

'You'll say that you thought the fight was escalating into a grain riot.'

'What made me think that?'

'Don't worry, my friend; the evidence will be there. You leave that to me; it'll be flying through the air.'

The Ides of October dawned bright and clear with a golden sun rising over the eastern hills, slowly drying the dew that glistened on Rome's streets and roofs. The city bustled with an air of anticipation and very little business was attempted; instead, the main part of the citizenry made their way to the Campus Martius, outside the northern walls of the city, to celebrate the most important of the three annual equestrian festivals dedicated to Mars. It was the day when the October Horse would be chosen after a series of two-horse chariot races round a course on the Campus Martius; the right-hand horse of the winning pair would be sacrificed to the god of war and guardian of agriculture in an ancient ritual to celebrate the completion of the agricultural and military-campaigning season.

Magnus and thirty of his brothers set out after completing their dawn rituals at the altar of the Crossroads Lares. Both Sextus and Cassandros carried sacks, each containing three of the modii measures that Aetius had delivered during the night. After a short walk they came to the one-storey house of Senator Pollo and joined his clients waiting outside its windowless frontage to escort the patron to the celebrations. Each man held the small bag of coins, their stakes for the day's wager which they had received from their patron as they greeted him at his morning *salutio* – a formalism that Magnus was excused from due to his religious obligations at the same time.

Magnus formed up his brothers at the head of the clients, ready to beat a passage for the senator and his entourage through the dense festival crowds. All along the street other parties were assembling, some larger, some smaller, depending on the status of the patron.

The heavy wooden door, the only opening to the street in the plain burnt-ochre-painted wall, opened and Gaius appeared at the top of the steps to applause from the lesser men who relied on his patronage. Raising his hand in acknowledgement, he waddled down to the pavement and made his way towards Magnus, the crowd parting for him, many of them forced to jump down into the soiled street.

Gaius dropped a weighty purse in Magnus' hand. 'May the gods grant you good fortune, my friend.'

'And may they grant the same to you, patronus.'

Gaius chuckled. 'I rather think that our good fortune is down to our own efforts.'

'Yeah, well, it don't do any harm to entreat the gods as well.'

'No, no, my friend, I quite agree; yet the rest of the city is probably entreating away and who will the gods grant good fortune to? I'll tell you: just the bookmakers and the sensible few that bet on form and fitness rather than which racing faction the chariots are in.'

'But these races aren't factional.' Magnus signalled to his brothers to move and the procession headed off down the hill.

'Of course not; none of the four colours can be seen to be more favoured by Mars than the other. But come now, Magnus; you know as well as I that, apart from the young bucks racing for family glory, most of the charioteers are all apprentices of one of the colours – the Reds, Blues, Whites or Greens – and a lot of the horses, rather than being genuine warhorses entered by families of standing, as ancient times, are, instead, veterans of the wars on the track. Don't tell me that you don't know which chariots belong to your beloved Greens just because they don't sport their colours?'

'It's hard to bet against the Greens,' Magnus mumbled as he hefted the heavy purse in his hand.

'I seem to remember you betting on a Red one, two, three a couple of years ago, and doing very well out of it.'

'That was business.'

Gaius pointed to the purse. 'And so is this; you'll notice that there is considerably more in there than I would normally distribute to you and your lads on a festival day.'

'I was wondering about that; what do you want us to do, sir?'

'Tomorrow, at the second hour, I want you to go to the House of the Moon in the stonemason's street on the Caelian Hill and take with you one of the tablets. Knock four times in quick succession, count three heartbeats and then repeat the signal. When asked to identify yourself say "Morpheus". I don't know how many men will be inside but at least two, I should imagine. You're to go alone; leave the lads that accompany you at the end of the street. You should be quite safe.'

'*Should be quite safe?* That doesn't sound like a hundred per cent guarantee.'

'What is in this life, my friend? Anyway, they will examine the tablet and take a sample. Tell them how many others like it you have and they will name a price. Refuse the first two offers out of hand, then say that you have to consult about the third but you'll have an answer within a couple of hours. Speed is of the essence now that the Urban Prefect has been informed of the theft.'

'He's been what?'

'The theft was noticed yesterday and needless to say Herod Agrippa was apoplectic. He went to bother the prefect of Ostia and the Urban Prefect here in Rome and demanded action. I don't know what they can do in reality, but it would be best to conclude the deal and get the tablets out of the city and the money into Antonia's hands as soon as possible.'

'I quite agree; business like this is best done fast.'

'Indeed. Now tell me, how will this other bit of business go today? Am I to be standing up in the Senate tomorrow, urging the Urban Prefect to launch an inquiry into weights and measures, and then proposing a vote of thanks?'

'It'll be fine; my mate, a centurion in one of the Urban Cohorts, will get his men into a provocative position and, with a little help from the lads and me, it should spark the riot.'

‘Urban Cohorts, eh? He’ll be sticking his neck out a bit; I hope you’ve paid him well.’

‘Don’t worry, senator, I ... Oh shit. I bribed him with half of the tablet that I took as a commission.’

Gaius turned to Magnus in alarm. ‘Has he still got it?’

‘I don’t know; but I suggested who to sell it to: doctors who treat senators, Praetorian officers

Urban Cohort officers.’

‘Oh dear. In the circumstances, that’s the worst place to go.’

Magnus’ ears rang as the people of Rome cheered and whistled, roaring on the twelve teams in the final race of the festival as they hurtled round the temporary track on the Trigarium, the equestrian training ground set in the bend of the Tiber, on the north-west corner of the Campus Martius. Here they had spent the morning enjoying racing of the highest calibre: a dozen heats with twelve pairs of the finest stallions driven to extreme exertion by their charioteers, all contesting the privilege to partake in the ultimate race in honour of the god.

Tens of thousands crammed round the track, ringed by a stout and solid wooden barrier and lined with soldiers of the Urban Cohorts in full military panoply, as the festival took place outside of the *pomerium*, the sacred boundary of the City of Rome. Every vantage point behind the spectator stands crammed twenty to thirty deep round the three-hundred-pace-long track with a turning post at each end, had been taken.

As the seven remaining teams still running approached the last lap, flanks and muzzles foaming with sweat, eyes rolling, great hearts pounding, charging forward to the cracks of whips over the withers, the noise escalated to deafening proportions. But Magnus did not notice; he did not cheer. Magnus just stood, unmoving, in the shadow of an equestrian statue of a long-dead patrician, waiting for news from Rufinus. His brothers had scoured the Campus Martius all morning, and had eventually found him and his century at the eastern end of the track. But with the press of people so tight, not even the bookmakers’ slaves who roamed the crowds taking bets could make it to the front rows. So Magnus had been forced to wait, uncertain whether Rufinus had attempted to sell his half of the residue and whether it had come to the ears of the Urban Prefect.

The roar escalated to a point that would have competed with the battle-cry of the god himself, and tens of thousands of fists were punched into the air as the winning team crossed the finish line after seven laps of the track. The charioteer leant back on the reins, wrapped around his waist, to slow his victorious stallions – a pair of chestnuts with black manes and tails. The soldiers of the Urban Cohorts stationed at the eastern end of the track, under Rufinus’ command, locked shields as they forced a path through the cheering crowd for the victor. Magnus and his brothers shadowed the procession from the edge of the spectators as it made its way towards the altar of Mars at the heart of the Campus Martius where the Flamen Martius, Caius Iunius Silanus, the aged high-priest of Mars, waited, brandishing one of the sacred spears in readiness for the sacrifice. Wearing a fringed cloak over his toga, of double-thick wool and clasped at the throat, his head encased in a leather skullcap fastened by a chinstrap and with a point of olive-wood poking out of its top, he called on the deity to look down kindly upon the sacrifice of the best horse in the city.

Heads tossing, nostrils snorting, and with tails swishing, the two magnificent beasts high-stepping along the path forced for them by punched shield bosses, their hoofbeats and the jangle of the harnesses lost in the tumult. Taken up with the delirium of the moment and aware in some corner of their equine minds that the frenzy was due to their achievement, they held their heads high – skittering occasionally, only to be brought back under control by a sharp tug of the reins – as they progressed slowly through the crowd swirling about them.

Occasionally catching sight of Rufinus’ transverse, white-horsehair crest, Magnus kept pace with him, making sure his brothers stayed close, knowing he must wait for his chance to get to the

centurion.

On reaching the altar, the right-hand horse was slipped out of its traces and the crowd, sensing the religious significance of the moment, began to hush as it was garlanded with pendants of bread; two priests of Mars moved into position on each side and grasped its reins. The Flamen Martius approached the unsuspecting animal with slow, deliberate, twisting steps so that his cloak fanned around him as he swayed left and then right. With his spear alternatively raised to the sky and then pointed at the October Horse's chest, he repeated forms of words so ancient that their meaning was only vaguely clear to those not schooled in the rituals of Mars. Now, no other voice could be heard other than that of the priest, who was accompanied by the snorts and stamps of his unsuspecting victim.

With a final appeal to the heavens, he brought his spear down and, grasping it in both white-knuckled hands, rammed it, overarm, into the beast's chest. The priests hauled on the reins as the October Horse screeched and made to rear; they kept it down as two more priests, with folds of their togas covering their heads, grasped the spear and, with a mighty effort, helped the Flamen Martius thrust it home and burst the heart of the gift to Mars. Transfixed on the spear and restrained by its reins, the beast tossed its head, arcing the pendants of bread through the air back and forth as blood flowed from the puncture in its breast; but this soon lessened as the victim's heart, tangled on the iron blade within it, ceased to pump and the pressure dropped. Down came the great beast as its forelegs buckled, cracking its knees on the paved ground already slick with blood; they slipped forward as the Flamen and his assistants hauled the sacred spear free. Released from its supporting prop and with its strength rapidly fading in its muscles, the October Horse rolled its eyes so only yellowish-white was visible and, with an unnatural rattle in its throat, collapsed on to its left side, twitching erratically.

Not a sound could be heard once the last breath had fled the sacrifice; for a few moments all stood still, spellbound by the intensity of the ritual. The Flamen Martius broke that spell by taking an axe from the altar and moving to the rear of the carcass; one of his assistants moved to pull the tail straight and iron flashed in the sun. The tail was severed and then held upright by the assisting priest to prevent the precious blood within from spilling. Holding it aloft, the priest and two colleagues made their way through the crowd, which parted for them as they increased their pace, in order to take the tail to the *Regia*, where the sacred spears and the sacred shields of Mars were housed. There, on the *Regia*'s hearth, the blood would be sprinkled.

The Flamen moved to the front of the carcass, intoning prayers, as his remaining three assistants pulled at the dead head to straighten the neck. A murmur of anticipation spread through the crowd as the time approached when it would be decided where the severed head would reside for the year: nailed to the *Regia*, if the *Via Sacra* Brotherhoods won the fight by dragging it there, or to the equal ancient Mamillian Tower in the *Suburra* if the Brotherhoods from that quarter won.

With a final, hoarse call to the deity, the high priest of Mars brought the axe slicing through the air over the top of his head, to thump down with the wet, solid blow of a butcher's cleaver, burying itself deep in the neck. With this stroke, the Flamen's job was done and he left it to his younger colleagues to part the head from the body. Once this had been achieved, the garland of loaves was thrown on the altar to be consumed by fire, and its smoke twirled up in thanks for yet another harvest preserved.

Now it was time to fight for the head.

Ushered by the Urban Cohorts, the crowd dispersed, falling back from around the altar, allowing the massed Brotherhoods from the two contesting areas to line up facing each other with a hundred paces between them. Both contingents were several hundred strong, although the *Suburra* looked to be slightly larger than the *Via Sacra*; neither side had any obvious weapons other than cudgels and knuckledusters. Magnus saw Grumio in the front rank of the *Suburra*, looking suspiciously toward Rufinus' Urban Cohort century and others beyond that had finally been freed from the press of crowd

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