

**TALES OF  
LINDUM  
COLONIA**

**VOLUME 2**

**'SURREPTIO'**

**ANTONY LEE**

## Dramatis personae

Caradoc	A blacksmith
Priscus	A man fallen on hard times
Jutinus	A street urchin
Lucius Sempronius	A baker
Gaius Valerius Nodens	The City Prefect
Marcus Lipius Verecundus	A wealthy Decurion
Atticus and Rufus	Men of Ratae
Fulvius	A watchman
Baxus	A thug

*Lindum Colonia, in the province of Britannia Inferior, AD 236*

## I

The rat's whiskers twitched frantically as it scurried across the wooden floor, darting this way and that in its ceaseless search for food. It jumped as a large hobnailed sandal crashed down beside it, and then darted into the safety of a crack between the floorboards. A deep voice from above the sandal grunted. 'Damn it! Missed the little beggar.' 'Forget the rats and get back to work, you idiot' hissed an irate second voice from outside the granary. The would-be rat-stamper grunted, and then turned and trudged his heavy-set frame out of the door into the evening gloom.

His two companions were standing beside three large carts, loading the final few bundles of wheat onto their already creaking frames. A few feet away lay a prone body, half hidden in the shadows of the low bushes that bordered the granary building.

When the task was complete and the grain store completely emptied, the men began to pull the heavily laden carts down the dirt track and towards the main road leading away from the city.

As the creaking of the carts' wheels receded into the distance, there was a rustle from within one of the bushes next to the prone body. A small, scruffy figure cautiously crawled out and looked around nervously. As soon as it was clear the men weren't coming back, it moved hesitantly towards the body, still lying motionless in the chaff-strewn dirt. The body was that of a man, probably in his late

50s or early 60s. A large pool of blood was spreading from a nasty gash in his temple. The small figure froze in shock at the sight, then scrambled to its feet and began to run towards the town as fast as it could.

## II

Caradoc shuffled impatiently on the wooden seating board. The small crowd that remained in the amphitheatre mostly wished they had left earlier, but now felt it would be too conspicuous to do so. The larger of the two colourfully dressed performers on the sand shakily lifted his smaller colleague onto his shoulders, but to only the faintest murmur of approval from the crowd. There was no denying it. This travelling acrobatic team were truly terrible. To alleviate his boredom, Caradoc pulled out the few bronze coins from his purse that he had been given as change earlier that morning and turned them over in his hand. He had stuffed them in without looking but now saw that they bore the portrait of Severus Alexander, the young Emperor murdered the year before. The food stall holder who had given them to him had no doubt been glad to foist them onto a customer not paying enough attention. Although the daily lives of Lindum's citizens had not been adversely affected by the change in Imperial rule thus far, many wondered how long that would last. The new Emperor, Maximinus Thrax, had been acclaimed by his troops in Germania after they had slaughtered young Severus Alexander and his mother. Caradoc had no strong feelings regarding Imperial politics, but even he had shuddered at the news. The Severans had been the ruling family for all of Caradoc's life and the end of their lineage brought a strange sense of unease. A vivid memory from Caradoc's childhood had been the sight of the Emperor Septimius Severus, the first of the dynasty, passing through Lindum Colonia in AD208, when Caradoc was just 8 years old. Severus was on his way to the northern military fortress at Eboracum, travelling on the great eastern road, Ermine Street, that passed straight through Lindum. The sight of such Imperial splendour - the colourful standards, gilded

carriages and gleaming Praetorian guards - had impressed the young Caradoc immensely and he had looked fondly on the Severans ever since, despite later members of the family failing to live up to the qualities of Septimius Severus himself. Severus had failed to make the return journey south, having died at Eboracum just three years later. Severus Alexander had been his great nephew.

The rumour was that the new Emperor, Maximinus Thrax, was a brutish character with little care for the suffering of the Empire's ordinary citizens and that many influential senators and advisors loyal to the previous regime had met untimely and violent deaths. Caradoc wondered how long Thrax might last before someone else decided to take the job by force.

He was pulled from his thoughts by a disjointed and unenthusiastic ripple of applause from the crowd as the tumblers successfully performed a series of barely co-ordinated backflips. Realising that this was going to be the highlight of their relationship with their audience they bowed and hastily made their way out of the arena.

Caradoc stood up and stretched his legs before descending the creaky wooden steps at the rear of the amphitheatre's steeply raked seating that led back to ground level. Ignoring a few vendors half heartedly trying to sell tacky souvenirs of the performance, he made his way towards the nearby upper west gate of the city. This gateway was one of the smaller entrances into the city, with only a single archway used by both vehicles and pedestrians, though few enough vehicles approached the city from the west to cause problems for those on foot. Once inside, Caradoc made his way through the streets until he reached the open expanse of the forum.

Passing between the tall sandstone pillars of the great colonnade and weaving his way through the crowds of people, he thought of the plan the Curia had agreed the previous year to renew the complex. After Caradoc had helped the Decurion Marcus Lipius Verecundus retrieve a stolen Imperial scroll, the Curia had been overwhelmingly in favour of continuing with their plan to renovate this great edifice. So far, fine words had been spoken but the structure remained unchanged. Caradoc had wondered after that affair what had happened to Lucius Norbanus Aemilianus, the Decurion and Priest of Minerva who had tried to steal the scroll and discredit Verecundus, not to mention have a gang try and kill Caradoc and his neighbours, the Sempronius family of bakers. Nothing had been heard of him since and Caradoc had come to assume, like everyone else, that Aemilianus had fled the city for good.

As he passed through the open courtyard at the heart of the forum, he was attracted by the sound of a notice being hammered to a post by a public slave. He sauntered across. 'What's the headline today then?' he asked. The slave, a scruffy creature in a stained brown tunic, sniffed and then replied, 'Another grain theft last night.' 'Another one?' asked Caradoc. 'What other ones have there been?' The slave turned away from his hammering and peered at Caradoc disdainfully. 'Don't you know anything? There have been three of these thefts now. The latest one has been worst of all, they beat an elderly watchman senseless. He might not even survive. The Curia are appealing for any information on who is responsible and offering a reward. So far, nobody knows anything.' 'Or is too scared to say anything' Caradoc replied. The slave cast him an odd look, so he quickly followed up with, 'I'll be sure to keep my ear to the ground then' and hurriedly went on his way.

### III

In the caupona close to his home that evening, Caradoc sat alone while he finished chewing his way through a rather grisly stew, aided slightly by the beaker of strong, cheap wine that sat on the table. His head was down and his mind lost in thought.

He was torn from his silent reverie and looked around at the sudden outburst of noise coming from the other side of the room. The caupona was only about half full, but two figures who had walked in had caused a commotion. Caradoc looked down at the table at the note that had been waiting for him when he had arrived home, pushed carefully between his shop's shutters. In neat handwriting it simply read, 'Apprentice needs master. Meet at the Eagle caupona at dusk.' Though the brevity of the note was extremely odd, Caradoc had been sufficiently intrigued to be at the caupona early to have his supper and ponder its contents.

The commotion at the doorway had been caused by the arrival of two figures, a man and a boy, both dressed in rags. They ignored the vocal appeals of patrons to stay out of the establishment and walked over to Caradoc. As they stood there, Caradoc could not help but notice how painfully thin they both were, and the state of their torn and dirty tunics. When the man spoke, it took Caradoc by surprise. His voice had an eloquence he had not expected. 'I am very grateful you answered my note. May we sit with you?' Caradoc gestured his assent and the man and boy both pulled up stools.

Caradoc pushed away his food bowl, half thankful it was empty and he would not seem wasteful, half guilty that he had eaten when

these two clearly had not. He would be ashamed to admit it, but their presence unnerved him a little.

The man spoke first. 'My name is Priscus. This is my son Justinus. Please know that we were not always like this. I once had a business in the city, selling firewood with my brother. It wasn't much but it kept a roof over our heads and food in our bellies. We all lived together, me, my brother, my wife Aurelia and Justinus. Then, two years ago everything fell apart. My brother fell ill with a fever. My beloved Aurelia tried to care for him but she then caught the sickness too. We lost them both within a month.'

Caradoc shuffled uncomfortably at this tragic tale, not knowing where to look or quite where this was all leading. He glanced at the boy Justinus, to gauge his reaction at mention of his mother's passing. The boy's blue eyes stared back at him. Not aggressively, but as if he were carefully analysing Caradoc. Priscus continued, 'without my brother to help me with the business and with burial costs to find, I soon fell on hard times and had to borrow money. Of course, in my desperation I turned to the wrong people.' He shook his head slowly as he spoke, 'I am sure you are a clever man, and I don't need to tell you how quickly our debts led us to appear as we do now, begging on the streets to stay alive.'

Caradoc felt a pang of sympathy for this man, a victim of ill-fate and personal tragedy. 'I am indeed sorry to hear your unfortunate tale. The Fates have woven a strange web for you'. He paused so as not to seem abrupt, but he was keen to get to the crux of the matter. 'Your note mentioned an apprenticeship'.

The tone of desperation in Priscus' voice as he spoke again was clear.

'My son Justinus here has just turned 8 years old. I want him to have a future. I had always intended for him to work alongside his uncle and I, but I cannot provide that for him now. If someone is willing to teach him an honest trade, he can still make something of himself despite my mistakes.' Caradoc slowly and deliberately leaned away from the table, giving himself some thinking time. Ever since he received the note, the idea of taking on an apprentice had been running through his mind, though he had never had one before and had no son of his own. He had to admit that the idea appealed to him, but the character of the boy would be crucial.

Caradoc turned to Justinus and looked at him once more. The boy continued to return a placid gaze. 'So, young man, do you like the idea of being a smith?' he asked. Justinus didn't answer for a moment, then carefully replied, 'Yes, Sir.' Caradoc could hear the nerves in his reply, yet could believe that the boy was bright, as his father had said. 'Do you know your sums? Can you read and write?' 'Yes, Sir' came the response. 'How about pushing carts and carrying heavy loads? are you strong enough?' 'Yes, Sir', came the reply. Caradoc laughed. 'Well, that's good, but we might have to work on your vocabulary!'. Priscus smiled nervously, keen not to interfere but clearly on edge that his son's future might hinge on his answers and attitude. He said, 'He's usually more talkative than this. He's been very quiet today for some reason. He's probably just nervous.'

Caradoc didn't reply to Priscus but remained focused on the boy, 'Its a hard life. You'll need to be up early in the mornings and work long hours. It's a hot and tiring job, so you'll need to become strong. I have a reputation in this town that I intend to keep. If you don't work hard and learn quickly, I'll have to let you go. But if you do, I'll make sure you're well fed, clothed and I'll teach you what I know so you

can maybe be a smith yourself one day. Does that sound like a deal?'

Priscus nodded enthusiastically on his son's behalf. 'I promise he won't let you down. He's a good lad, and I've been teaching him his words and numbers. He'll work hard for you, I know it.' He tussled the boy's dirty hair. As he watched, Caradoc couldn't help but think that the first thing the boy needed was a bath. He stood up. 'Bring him to my workshop at dawn tomorrow.' He placed some coins on the table. 'And get yourselves a good meal and a bath with this tonight.' Before they could thank him, he turned and walked out into the cool evening air.

### III

Caradoc ensured that he was up especially early the following morning to guarantee he made a professional first impression to his new apprentice. After eating a quick breakfast of bread and milk he began to organise the shop for the day's work. As he lifted the shutter from the front it was still dark, but he was startled to find Priscus and Justinus stood patiently outside. It was clear that they had taken his advice and bathed.

After waiting uncomfortably while Priscus said farewell to his son, stifling tears but thanking Caradoc profusely, the father eventually left and Caradoc took his new apprentice into his workshop. He had prepared a simple bed in the corner of his small living area behind the shop. Straw matting and a coarse woollen blanket would be the boy's only private space while he learned his new trade. As Caradoc began to show Justinus around his new home, he was painfully aware of just how quiet the boy was. His eyes never stopped watching Caradoc, but he rarely uttered a word and answered questions monosyllabically. During that first day Caradoc showed his young charge how to make the correct offerings at the shop's small shrine to ensure the Smith god would bless their day's work and prevent accidents. He showed him the tools of the trade, and noticed the intense concentration in the boy's eyes as he watched Caradoc forge and hone knife blades. At the end of the day, when Justinus was fast asleep on his rough bed, Caradoc sat on his simple wooden stool and reflected on his decision. The boy was undoubtedly bright. He observed his surroundings with an almost unnerving intensity yet he was still very quiet. Caradoc hoped it was simply the shock of his new lifestyle and the absence of his father.

As the weeks slipped by, Caradoc became increasingly convinced that he had made a good decision in making Justinus his apprentice. The boy worked hard and never complained. He continued to watch Caradoc's every move and was beginning to grasp the basic techniques involved in casting and forging iron, bronze and lead. The boy had not yet been allowed to attempt anything involving the furnace or molten metal, however. Although he was now marginally more conversational than he had originally been and was never sullen, Caradoc still worried about the cause of the boy's withdrawn nature, and he was aware that Justinus had often woken up abruptly in the night, apparently with disturbed dreams.

Caradoc had decided that Justinus should start making deliveries for him about the city. Although seemingly a simple task, it was hard work carrying the baskets and pushing the cart, and a lot of Caradoc's stock was at risk of being stolen from such a young boy. Nevertheless, Caradoc hoped the interaction might bring Justinus out of his shell and he would revel in the responsibility.

## V

Stepping out onto the cobbled street, Justinus adjusted the heavy basket in his hands. Dressed in the new sandals and tan-coloured tunic Caradoc had bought him and with good food inside him, he certainly didn't look quite the same scrawny beggar he had only a few weeks before. He looked around at the street scene before him. Caradoc's shop was located in the busy trader's district south of both the city walls and the river. To his left, the main road led straight to the large, looming walls of Lindum Colonia. To his right, he could just make out the point in the distance where the road forked, one branch heading towards Londinium, the other towards Ratae, and eventually places as far away and mysterious as Corinium and Isca Dumnoniorum.

It was mid morning on a warm early summer day and the streets were bustling. He set off up the street towards the city walls, glancing sideways at the Sempronius family's bakery next door as he did so. Although he was aware of the family and had briefly been introduced, he did not yet know them well. They seemed nice enough though, and had sometimes handed him little cakes when they passed him in the alleyway that divided the two properties. Justinus always enjoyed the attention.

He reached the curved double towers of the city's southern gate and paused. The enormous edifice had only been completed about thirty years earlier, and still had a thick coat of plaster, gleaming white in the sun, showing the ambition and status of the city to travellers and merchants alike. The gateway had always frightened Justinus a little,

but now he was especially nervous. Caradoc had told him that the guards would want to check his basket before letting him through and that that was fine, but under no circumstances were they allowed to keep anything for themselves. If they tried, Justinus was to scream for help. Justinus had spent enough time begging for scraps on the streets to be cautious of the guards, and had no desire to have any interaction with them at all. He still bore the scar on his shin from a particularly fierce hobnail-booted kick he had taken six months earlier when he and his father had tried to sleep in the wrong place. He took a deep breath and moved towards the looming gateway.

Unlike some of the city's other gateways, the south gate had two large gates but no smaller pedestrian gates, meaning that all traffic had to squeeze through together. Of the two giant archways, only one was currently open to allow people in and out. At this time of day, the majority of people were still heading into the city. A small crowd was moving through the open gateway and Justinus tried to tag along behind them to escape notice. The two guards on duty were waving them through, exchanging gruff pleasantries with one of the men in the group, clearly one of their cronies. Justinus passed through the outer gate and into the stone tunnel of the gateway itself. Just when he thought he was safely through, he shuddered as a large hand clasped his shoulder.

'Trying to sneak through without us noticing you, lad?' sneered a gruff voice. Justinus turned to see one of the guards looming over him. 'What's in that basket then, eh?' Justinus pulled back the cloth covering the basket's contents with a shaky hand, trying as hard as he could to not let the guard detect his nerves. The freshly made iron knife blades gleamed in the morning sunlight. The guard leaned in

close. 'And where did you steal these from then?' 'I didn't steal them, Sir, I'm delivering them'. 'Hmm. I haven't seen you before. Who are you delivering them to?' 'I'm the new apprentice of Caradoc, the smith. I'm taking these blades to the market to deliver them to a fishmonger named Volusius' 'Caradoc's new apprentice, eh? OK then. You run along and make your delivery. But I'll be checking with Caradoc next time I see him.' Justinus scampered away from the guard as quickly as he could, and then headed through the streets towards the market, the guffawing of the guard still in his ears as he left.

Weaving through the tightly-knit stalls and the throng of shoppers and traders in the market, Justinus subconsciously slipped back into his old habits. He had taken a bite out of the apple before realising that he had absent-mindedly stolen it from a stall while the owner was distracted. A sudden pang of guilt washed over him. He remembered Caradoc's warning when they first met at the caupona that he had a reputation to uphold. Justinus dropped the apple to the floor as if it was suddenly red hot, and vowed never to let himself slip back into thieving again.

His nose told him he was nearing the fishmonger's stall. He handed the basket of knives to Volusius, and once they had been satisfactorily checked for quantity and quality, received a leather pouch of coins in return which he stowed safely inside his tunic. Justinus then left the market and began to head back towards the south gate.

On the way, he passed the large octagonal public fountain that dominated the corner of a major junction inside the south gate. Squeezing between two elderly ladies sat chatting at the edge, he

bent down to scoop up some water with his hands. As he did so, he heard a snippet of conversation from the other side of the fountain. It was a gruff voice he recognised. It was a voice he had been hearing in his disturbed dreams every night for the past few weeks. Slowly and cautiously he raised his head. Sure enough, he recognised the figure with his back to him. He was a huge man with a dark green tunic, a thick leather belt and long, straggly black hair. Next to him sat a smaller companion, though still large compared to most of the people around the fountain. The larger man suddenly let out a loud guffaw and Justinus flinched in fright. The huge man stood up, clasped the smaller man violently by the shoulder and leaned closer to him. Justinus could just hear enough to catch his say 'it happens tonight', before he scurried away in fear.

Empty basket in hand he ran back towards the south gate, head bowed. He willed the guards not to stop him and walked swiftly through the gate arch. Thankfully the guards were occupied in rifling through the contents of a fruit cart being pulled by an elderly man and Justinus slipped past unnoticed, breaking into a run again once he was through the gate.

## VI

Caradoc was taking a nap in the back room of the workshop when he was woken by the sound of Justinus returning. Heaving himself wearily to his feet he wondered how the boy's first delivery had gone. Successfully, he hoped. As he entered the shop area he instantly knew that wasn't the case. Justinus sat hunched up against the wall, clutching his knees against his chest, breathing heavily. Cautiously he approached his apprentice. He had already promised himself not to be angry if the delivery had gone wrong. Confidence was the most important thing for the boy to acquire. 'Justinus' he said gently as he knelt down beside him. 'Is everything alright? What happened'. The boy raised his head. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. His eyes were wide. 'If it was the delivery, then don't worry. We can easily make Volusius some more knives.' Justinus shook his head. 'Then what on earth is the matter?'

After Justinus had remained uncommunicative for some time, seemingly lost in his own thoughts, head still bowed, Caradoc was worried enough to fetch Priscus. Now the boy's father and master both knelt beside him, trying to ascertain the problem. 'Whatever it is, you won't be in trouble' cajoled Priscus. 'What has got you so upset?'

Eventually Justinus began to recover from his shock, and began to become upset. Tears rolled down his face and he flung his arms around his father.

He gulped down the beaker of milk that Caradoc had brought for him and slowly began to speak, 'I saw some men at the fountain today. It

was the same men I saw a few weeks ago, when...' his voice tailed off.

'Justinus, it is very important you tell us what happened. Did these men hurt you?' asked his father. 'No' Justinus replied. 'Not me. It was when we were sleeping near the granaries on the river bank. I had got up in the night to go pee, and I heard voices. It sounded unusual so I crept closer. I hid in some bushes and I saw...' he tailed off again, only this time a tear rolled down his cheek. Caradoc was reminded just how young the boy still was. Whatever he had seen was not meant for such innocent eyes, but it was important that they find out what had happened. This time, both Caradoc and Priscus remained silent.

Justinus composed himself again and continued. 'There were four men altogether. Two of them were the men from the fountain. They had another man with them. The fourth man was the watchman for the granary. They had pushed him back against the granary wall and he was pleading with them to let him go. The largest man turned to one of the others to ask what to do. The man said 'no witnesses' and the large man took off his belt and hit the watchman on the side of his head with the belt buckle'.

Caradoc and Priscus were stunned into silence. Priscus leaned forward and hugged his son. Caradoc's mind was racing. He vaguely remembered the news of grain robberies and an assault, but it had seemed a dead case. There were no witnesses to the crime. Well, not until now.

Justinus continued his story, sounding more confident at finally being able to share his terrible secret. 'The watchman hit the floor at once. The men left him and began to empty the contents of the granary

onto the carts they had brought. I could hear them talking. They kept mentioning someone called Atticus. I wanted to leave but I was terrified they would hear me and kill me. It was only when they finally left that I came out of hiding. I looked at the watchman, but the sight was horrible. I think he was dead. I ran back to where we were sleeping but I was too scared to tell anyone what I saw.'

## VII

Caradoc and Priscus sat patiently on the wooden bench, waiting for the Prefect to see them. The ante-room inside the city's basilica was light and airy, and public slaves bustled around them, ignoring them. Priscus had borrowed one of Caradoc's tunics for the occasion, lest his tattered appearance lead to their tale being rejected outright as fantasy. Caradoc glanced sideways at his apprentice's father, who sat lost in thought. Caradoc allowed himself a smile. The tunic was far too big for him and dangled ridiculously below Priscus' knees. Although he had only known Priscus and Justinus a few weeks, he had come to like them both. Priscus was an honest man, fallen on hard times. Caradoc could easily imagine how the same could have happened to him. Although he wasn't wealthy enough to help Priscus financially, even if he would accept such handouts, he was determined to help his son to make something of himself.

A slave came across and bade them follow him into the Prefect's office. He closed the door behind them and silently departed, leaving them alone with the man behind the desk. He looked up from the pile of wax tablets in front of him, smiled, and gestured for them to sit. 'My name is Gaius Valerius Nodens' he said. 'I am the Prefect of the city, responsible for law and order. My slave tells me you have some information for me regarding the recent spate of grain thefts.' He leaned forward and said, with a wry smile, 'You haven't come here to confess by any chance, have you?'

Priscus looked shocked, but Caradoc simply laughed and said, 'I'm afraid not.' The Prefect spoke again, 'I did not catch your names. May I have the pleasure of knowing who I am addressing?' Caradoc

replied first, 'My name is Caradoc. I am a smith working in the city.' Priscus shuffled uncomfortably, unsure how to introduce himself. Caradoc saved him from embarrassment by continuing, 'this man is called Priscus. He is the father of my apprentice boy. We have information that might help you catch the men who robbed a granary about three weeks ago and killed the watchman.'

'Killed?' exclaimed the Prefect. 'I'm happy to say that whoever told you that was misinformed. The watchman, Fulvius, was dealt a vicious blow to the side of the head which might well have killed him. Thankfully, however, he is alive, though he has no memory of the event and he may never fully recover. Sadly any evidence he might have provided is lost to us, and nobody else has come forward with any information. Until now that is.' He left this final statement hanging in the air in anticipation.

Priscus now spoke up. 'My son witnessed the theft and the assault. He was too scared to tell anybody until now but yesterday he saw the men responsible and decided to tell us what he witnessed.' He proceeded to recount the details of Justinus' tale to Nodens, who listened impassively. 'I see', he said when Priscus had finished. 'And where is your son now?' 'He is at my workshop, outside the southern gate' interjected Caradoc. Nodens stood up and put his hands on his desk, leaning forwards. 'I will need to see him and hear his story directly, but what you have described might enable us to identify these men and catch them in the act.'

'How many similar thefts have there been?' asked Caradoc. Nodens sighed, sinking back into his seat. 'Three in total. The first two were in quick succession about 2 months ago. Then nothing for a few weeks before the one your boy saw. To be honest, we expect

another attempt soon. If your young lad saw the men in the city then it confirms our suspicions. We don't think they are local.' 'What about the name they mentioned? This man named Atticus.' asked Caradoc. Nodens sighed. 'I have no idea. It means nothing to me. I know of most people in this city, especially the criminals. I've never heard of anyone called Atticus.'

'We'll do what we can to help bring these men to justice' volunteered Caradoc, rising to his feet. Priscus cast him a glance which said he wasn't quite so sure he shared Caradoc's enthusiasm to get involved.

## VIII

Caradoc mused that Justinus was a changed boy now that the weight of what he had witnessed had been lifted from his young shoulders. He was as bright and attentive as ever, but was now much more conversational and cheery. Caradoc prayed to the gods that Justinus continued to be so happy after he had told him what he now needed to.

He found the boy diligently sweeping the shop floor and ushered him to a stool. 'Now, Justinus. You remember telling your story to Nodens, the Prefect?' 'Of course I do. He seemed very happy to hear it!' 'Oh he was', said Caradoc, pausing afterwards. 'But there's something you don't know yet. He needs you to do something else to help him.' 'What?' Justinus quickly asked, apprehension clearly audible in his voice. 'Well, if they catch the criminals, they will need you to identify them face to face. Is that something you're prepared to do?' He saw the boy's face visibly drop at the prospect. A world of possible outcomes flashed through Justinus' mind. Most of them weren't positive. The majority were downright unpleasant thoughts on what the gang would do to him. Nevertheless he took a deep breath and bravely said, 'if you and father think it best, then I will.'

## VIII

Caradoc kicked his heel impatiently against the wall he was leaning against, arms folded. It was already dark and the suspects had been in the bar for over two hours. The three guards accompanying Caradoc and Nodens, on detachment to the city from the XX Legion, also looked bored. Only Nodens remained outwardly alert. After locating the three men from Justinus' description, they had shadowed them through the city as far as this bar, nestled in the shadow of the south eastern walls, but they were starting to think they wouldn't catch them doing any illegal act this evening, except perhaps for being drunk.

Time ticked by and the men still hadn't left the bar. Nodens began to get suspicious and suggested somebody go in and see what the men were up to. He rationalised that as he, an important official, might be recognised and the Legionaries were in uniform, there was no option but for Caradoc to volunteer. Grumbling at the Prefect's logic, Caradoc assumed the face and demeanour of a man simply looking for a drink. After hours of wasting time, it wasn't a difficult part to play.

As he entered the dimly lit room, he cast his eye around but couldn't immediately identify their quarries. He took a seat in a quiet corner and began to look more closely at each table. Half were empty. One had a man slumped over it, asleep, his beaker lying on its side with its contents slowly soaking into the cream woollen sleeve of his tunic. Another had a young man and woman. She was obviously less impressed with his conversation than he expected and looked ready to leave at any moment. A third table was playing host to a lively

debate about the price of oysters, though sadly both sides of the argument were being enthusiastically espoused by the single elderly man sat there. It wasn't clear to Caradoc which side would come out on top when the man eventually finished.

One thing was certain. The men were no longer here. Caradoc burst back out of the door and told a frustrated Nodens the news. He sent two of the guards to the back of the bar to investigate. They returned a few moments later, confirming that there was a kitchen door, but the staff denied seeing anybody use it apart from them. Belying his status, Nodens spat in the dirt in frustration. 'They've given us the slip tonight, but at least we know that the granaries are safe. Let's call it a night.'

## X

Caradoc's peaceful sleep was rudely disturbed by Justinus shaking him awake. 'Sir, there's someone here to see you. He says its urgent.'

His hand groped around beside him and located his tunic where he'd dumped it late last night after getting back from the failed operation. Pulling it over his head, he stumbled wearily to his feet. 'What time is it?' he asked Justinus. 'An hour after dawn.' He slouched into the shop area where the sleep-disturber was waiting.

It was a smartly dressed public slave, looking as if he had been the unlucky one to be forced to wait for even a few moments in such surroundings. He was examining a chisel, but on seeing Caradoc enter, he immediately put it down and launched into delivering his message. 'I am commanded to insist that you attend on the Prefect Gaius Valerius Nodens as a matter of the utmost urgency.'

'I only left him a few hours ago!' exclaimed Caradoc. 'What on earth can have happened since then?' 'I'm afraid, Sir', replied the slave, 'that there was another granary theft last night.' Caradoc was fully awake now. He threw his woollen cloak over his shoulders as he headed out of the door, pausing only to shout back over his shoulder to tell Justinus that he was in charge of the shop until he got back.

## XI

As Caradoc walked towards the granary in the early morning light, he saw the Prefect standing in the doorway, staring motionlessly at the void inside. He didn't turn his head as Caradoc climbed the short flight of steps and stood beside him. Nodens voice echoed slightly as he spoke, 'the bastards tricked us. While we were wasting our time following decoys, they were clearing out this granary.' He spat on the wooden floor.

Caradoc stepped inside and gazed at the large empty wooden shell. He realised that although he had seen the city's granaries, situated on the northern bank of the river just outside the city wall, all his life, this was the first time he'd ever been inside one. The scale surprised him, but the cavernous space made him feel uncomfortable and he quickly turned and walked out. Passing Nodens, who remained motionless, apparently going back over the events in his head, Caradoc went down the steps and back to the riverside. It was a crisp and clear morning, the water lapping noisily against the wooden jetties.

A small group of the guards that attended Nodens were milling around outside, talking in small groups. None of them took any notice of Caradoc as he passed them. Caradoc recognised the three guards that had been on the previous night's surveillance. Caradoc paused and looked at the ground. The hobnailed bootprints of the guards were clearly visible in the dusty soil. Looking over his shoulder, Caradoc saw his own faint trail from the steps. Keeping still, he called out to the Prefect. Nodens turned and started to walk down the steps. Caradoc held out a hand, gesturing him to stop. 'Has anyone

thought to check for boot or cart prints in this dry ground?' A frustrated look crossed Nodens' face. Clearly he and his guards had been walking over the site for some time, trampling evidence into the dust.

Nodens organised the guards into teams to sweep the area for clues. As Caradoc suspected, their earlier activity had destroyed the majority of any tracks, but some traces of cart wheel marks could still be found. Any boot prints from the thieves proved impossible to distinguish from those of Nodens and his guards. While the guards finished their check of the area, Caradoc wandered around the edge of the granary. Some low bushes caught his attention, and he instantly remembered Justinus telling of how he hid and watched the last robbery. Caradoc shuddered as he thought how terrified the boy must have been. As he looked at the bushes, a glint of metal caught his eye. Walking over, he saw that it was an enamelled bronze brooch. He bent down and picked it up. Was this something lost by one of the thieves? Caradoc turned the brooch over in his hands, examining its decoration. He had to admit, it was a finely crafted piece of jewellery. He should know. It was one that he himself had made.

## XII

Caradoc sat in his workshop that night, the brooch lying on the table in front of him. The little ceramic oil lamp flickered, casting a long shadow across the table. Caradoc picked up the brooch again, as he had done many times already that night. The brooch was in the form of a duck, with cells of alternating blue and red enamel on its folded wings. Delicately incised circles picked out its eyes. The brooch was in excellent condition, undamaged since it had left that very workshop. Caradoc made many brooches, and most were sold to middlemen to sell on. He had no way of knowing who the owner of this particular brooch had been. Until he had turned it over that was. For next to the pin, the owner had scratched a faint name - 'Fulvius'.

The next morning, Caradoc left home early and began his walk up through the city. He passed through the southern gate and up the main street, passing the public fountain and the guild of Mercury, protector of travellers and merchants. He swiftly made his way up the wide steps and through the gate dividing the upper and lower parts of the city and along the wide street that led alongside the grand colonnade that marked the entrance to the forum. Behind it stood the imposing basilica, and it was to that building that he walked. Once inside, he located Nodens' office and the slave that had ushered him and Priscus in to see the Prefect a few days earlier. The slave seemed glad of a few minutes' distraction. 'This watchman, Fulvius. The one who was beaten so badly in the granary theft. You wouldn't happen to know where he lives, would you?'

## XIII

The road leading northwards from Lindum seemed to stretch endlessly in front of Caradoc. He had passed through one of the pedestrian arches of the northern gate and was now walking alongside the many tombs and grave markers that lined both sides of the road. Some were large, classically styled family mausolea, others smaller, more individual monuments. Some crumbled pathetically, the final remnants of lives now forgotten by everyone. Caradoc kept walking past them all. Fulvius' house lay beyond them in a small group of traders houses. The slave had told Caradoc to look for a merchant's house. Fulvius' cousin Albinus owned it, and Fulvius and his wife lived with him.

He quickly located the thatched timber building and wandered into the shop area. Inside the gloomy interior was a ramshackle collection of second hand goods. Fulvius' cousin was seemingly someone who would buy up everything offered to him in the hope of selling it on at a profit. Oil lamps, small marble statuettes of dubious quality, ceramic pots of all shapes and sizes, various wooden tubs of oils and food products and even leather shoes could seemingly be bought here. When Caradoc walked in, an elderly lady was arguing with a balding, middle aged man over the price of a flagon of olive oil. He waited patiently just inside the doorway until the man gave in and agreed to the old woman's price demands, out of despair rather than being happy with the business deal, it seemed.

When she had shuffled out of the store, grinning from ear to ear that her belligerence had paid off, Caradoc sidled up to the man. 'Tough customer, eh?' 'Every week she's in here, trying to get things for next

to nothing' the man complained, shaking his head. 'She'll put me out of business!'. 'I know the type.' sympathised Caradoc. 'You must be Albinus, right?'. 'That's right. So, what reasonably priced goods can I sell to you then, my friend?' asked Albinus. 'I'm actually here looking for someone. A man named Fulvius.' Albinus' eyes immediately narrowed suspiciously and he took a step back away from Caradoc. The family clearly feared the thieves coming back to finish the job. 'Why might you be looking for Fulvius?' He asked. Caradoc realised his suspicions and tried to appease them. 'My name is Caradoc. I'm working with the Prefect, Nodens, to try and catch the men who assaulted him. I also wanted to return this to him.' As he spoke he held out the duck brooch in his open palm. Albinus took it, peered closely at it, then suddenly lifted his head and shouted, 'Maia!' Caradoc flinched at the sudden noise. A few moments later a middle aged woman shuffled from a back room to Albinus' side. He handed her the brooch and said, 'this man has come to see Fulvius. He's working with that Prefect, Nodens.' Maia looked up at Caradoc. 'I am Fulvius' wife. I am afraid you won't get much out of him, but follow me. I'll take you to him.' She turned and began to walk back into the back room. Caradoc followed silently, nodding politely to Albinus as he passed.

In the small back room, Fulvius lay on a rough wooden bed, covered by a coarse woollen blanket. A large seeping bandage was wrapped around his head. As Caradoc gently approached, he could see that Fulvius was asleep. Maia spoke, 'He sleeps most of the time now. When he wakes, he just stares at me like he doesn't remember who I am.' Caradoc sat himself on a stool by the side of the bed. Maia sat on the foot of the bed itself. Caradoc watched her slowly turn the duck brooch over and over in her hands, lost in her thoughts. 'Tell me about the brooch' he asked gently. 'I bought it for

him last year' she replied, the memory causing a tear to roll gently down her cheek. 'I hadn't thought about it at all since the attack, but he must have been wearing it that night. He used to wear it every day and carefully wrap it in a cloth to protect it whenever he took it off. I suppose it fell off his cloak when they were...' she tailed off and had to turn her head to the wall. 'Has he said anything at all about what happened that night?' She shook her head sadly and looked back at Caradoc, 'Nothing I can make any sense of. He mumbles in his sleep sometimes. He says some things over and over again.' Caradoc leaned towards her. 'What does he say?' 'Most of it I can't make out. But he says two words most of all. One is a name. It sounded something like 'Attus'. The other I think was 'Ratae'.'

Caradoc politely bade his farewell to Maia and Albinus and began to walk back towards the city gates. His head was buzzing. Fulvius' mumbled 'Attus' was surely the name 'Atticus' that Justinus had heard the thieves say. The other word, Ratae, made Caradoc sure he was soon to go on a journey. Ratae Corieltavorum, a large town some 50 miles to the southwest along the Fosse Way, was the only place it could mean. The hunt for the mysterious Atticus had begun.

## XIII

The journey to Ratae would not be a quick one, despite the existence of the wide and well paved Fosse Way, which ran almost from Caradoc's front door down to distant Isca Dumnoniorum in the far south west of the province of Britannia Superior.

He spent the next day sorting out his affairs and spreading the word as best he could that the shop would be closed for a week. He finished placing a sign on the shutters and went to the corner of the living space where he kept a small grey jar hidden under a loose floorboard. Inside it was Caradoc's savings pile. Although his business made him enough money to get by, as he lifted a pile of silver coins out to take with him he ruminated that closing the shop for a week while he ran off on what might be a fool's errand wasn't the best way to make the little pot overflow with riches. If he wavered in his desire to stop the thieves, however, it was only for a brief moment as the memories of Fulvius lying helpless in his bed, of Maia's tears and of Justinus' terror at relaying his story washed over him. With grim resolve, he replaced the floorboard and began to pack a small sack of travelling clothes and provisions.

He had spoken with his neighbour Lucius Sempronius, the baker, that morning and he had agreed to take care of Justinus while Caradoc was away. Justinus was now stood by the ox cart Caradoc was preparing and pleading not to be left behind. Caradoc gently told the boy that he needed him to stay behind and take care of the empty shop, but that he mustn't go into the city on his own. Caradoc had been secretly torn as to whether Justinus would be safer by his side travelling to Ratae or staying with Sempronius. In the end he

rationalised that he should leave Justinus behind, but ensure that he stayed inside lest he run into the thieves again. Although they would not recognise Justinus, his reaction might draw attention.

As his ox cart slowly trundled southwards away from Lindum he looked back over his shoulder at the tiny waving figure in the distance and sighed.

## XV

The journey to Ratae had not been a pleasant one, and as his ox cart trundled into sight of the town's walls, Caradoc had almost begun to regret ever setting out. He had been travelling for 3 days, and was weary of the bouncing motion of the ox cart, which had left him feeling rather sore, but also of the roadside inns he had been sleeping in each night. Ironically, when on his painful and slow progress on the road he had wished to be resting peacefully for the night, but when lying in a cheap, dirty bed, plagued by summer insects, he longed to be back on the cart, alone with his thoughts.

One inn, two nights previously, had been the worst of all. He had arrived rather late to find a surly innkeeper with hideous facial sores who was less than happy to be disturbed. He claimed to have no rooms available, despite Caradoc seeing no evidence of anyone else there except the miserable innkeeper and his toothless and equally disgusting wife. Dry bread was the only food they claimed to have available that late at night, and Caradoc found himself bedding down in the stable next to his ox. To compensate for his meagre dinner he took some cheese and salted meat from the travel pack that he was carefully managing for such occasions. After a barely tolerable sleep he awoke and set off on his way early, not even bothering to enquire what excuse for a breakfast might be available.

As he trundled along the road, the sun still rising over the horizon, he pulled his pack onto his knee and again looked to use his rations to curb his hunger. He cursed as he realised that the remainder of his meat and cheese were no longer inside. In addition to their poor hospitality, the revolting innkeeper and his wife were clearly also

opportunist thieves.

Caradoc therefore arrived at the gates of Ratae Corieltavorum hungry and weary, as keen at that moment to avail himself of better quality accommodation and the local public baths as he was to track down the mysterious Atticus.

Caradoc had never been to Ratae before, and it was with some trepidation that he approached the city gate. He stabled the ox and cart outside the walls and proceeded in on foot. He passed through the large gateway with no trouble, and began to make his way along the road towards the centre of the settlement.

Unlike Lindum with its separate upper and lower enclosures, Ratae was a town with a single wall, nestled alongside a river. Although he had never before been, he had always found himself looking down on Ratae, convinced of the superiority of the higher status Colonia that had always been his home. Walking through the streets of Ratae, a growing and bustling Civitas Capital, he had to grudgingly admit that the town had its fair share of wealth and status too, and seemed to possess all the public amenities anyone could wish for.

Keen to unwind after days of discomfort, Caradoc made his way to the town's central forum. He bought himself a freshly made hot pie from a stall and sat down on a bench next to an elderly man. As he ate, he asked his new companion where the baths were. Thankfully, the old man's directions were clear and Caradoc was soon on his way towards welcome relaxation.

## XVI

Caradoc sighed with satisfaction and leaned back against the wall of the caldarium, the hot waters lapping around him and already starting to ease his tired body. He let his eyes close and sat still, savouring the feeling of the water. He was sharing the hot bath with only one other man, a young red-headed local who was sat quietly on the other side of the pool. As he soaked, Caradoc's mind slowly turned to the matter at hand - finding Atticus. He needed to start asking around to see if anyone recognised the name. Wary of coming across like a crazy man, he tried to casually start a conversation with the red-headed man, who was relaxing with his head back, staring into space. 'Long day, huh friend?' Caradoc ventured. The man slowly moved his head forward and looked across at him. 'Mmm' he replied, non-committally. Caradoc continued, 'so what line of work are you in?' The man didn't reply immediately but kept looking at Caradoc, clearly unwilling to engage in longer conversation than was polite with a stranger in a hot tub. 'Stonemason' he said after a pause.

Caradoc cursed himself for the awkward situation he was now in. He had no desire to know anything of this man's life and background, he simply wanted clues to Atticus' whereabouts and character. He decided to just ask straight out. 'I'm looking for a man named Atticus. You don't know anyone by that name do you?'

The stonemason continued to look at Caradoc. 'No.' He said curtly. 'What line of work is he in?' Caradoc had to confess that he had no idea. 'Well, what does he look like? Is he wealthy? A trader? A beggar? Does he live in Ratae or outside?' Caradoc, now feeling foolish, had to again admit that he knew absolutely nothing about the man for

whom he was searching. 'Sorry. Can't help you' said the stonemason, heaving himself out of the water and quickly walking away. Caradoc sank back, realising just how futile this trip might be.

He climbed out of the hot bath and, wrapping himself in a towel, walked through to the tepidarium, the warm room, where a number of people were gathered. Some were stretched out on stone tables being massaged. Others were rubbing oil into their skin or having it scraped off by friends. Caradoc headed towards a group that were relaxing around a low table, playing dice. After watching for a few moments, the invitation to join them that he had hoped for duly arrived, and he stretched out on the floor with the men.

As they played, he surveyed the group. All middle aged, it was clear they all had some previous acquaintance, and possibly met here often. They were sociable and pleasant company, and Caradoc soon chatted away comfortably with them, especially the man next to him, who it turned out was a salt merchant called Rufus. After playing for an hour or so, Rufus asked Caradoc what brought him to Ratae, and where he was staying. Remaining deliberately vague about his quest, Caradoc admitted that he had no lodgings arranged, and would appreciate a local suggestion. Rufus insisted that Caradoc stay with him and his wife that night, to avoid any bad experiences with local taverns. Caradoc politely refused, but it was clear that Rufus would not take no for an answer.

Caradoc therefore found himself sitting in a very pleasant parlour, the walls rich with painted floral decoration, on a fine couch with bronze lion's heads on the arms. A tray of delicate titbits sat on a table between himself and Rufus and his wife, who perched on an equally fine couch. Caradoc couldn't help but feel out of place in such

a room. Though it was hardly grand on the scale of the Empire and Rome, it stood out as being of very fine quality here, and certainly more than Caradoc had expected when he accepted Rufus' kind invitation. Being a salt merchant was clearly a lucrative job.

Rufus leaned forward and took a small pastry off the plate, passing it to his wife, Volustia. She was a dainty thing, and had been extremely welcoming to Caradoc. She now politely enquired what had brought him all this way from Lindum.

Caradoc decided to be honest, and said 'I came here looking for a man, though truth be told I know nothing about him apart from his name, and I fear that I am wasting my time even looking.' 'Well' said Volustia, chewing on her pastry 'You might at least tell us the name. You never know.' 'Very true' said Caradoc. 'The man I am searching for is called Atticus.' Volustia stopped chewing and looked at her husband.

'There is only one person I know of by that name' said Rufus. 'A merchant. He is well known at the macellum. Do you have business with him?' Caradoc was intrigued by Volustia's reaction to hearing the name, and cautious of saying anything out of place before he knew more about Atticus. 'Not directly' he said. 'I am working with the Prefect at Lindum. Atticus' name has been mentioned in association with an incident that occurred a few weeks ago. I merely wish to ask him a few questions.' Rufus smiled. 'Then in the morning we will go to the macellum together and I will take you to see him.' 'You said he was a merchant.' said Caradoc. 'What does he trade?' 'Grain' replied Rufus.

## XVII

The sun was still low in the sky as Rufus and Caradoc strolled through the streets towards the macellum. As he watched the warm glow developing on the rooftops, he considered that he hadn't felt this refreshed in days. The bed at Rufus' house was as warm and comfortable as the hospitality, and Caradoc tried not to remind himself that he would soon be back on the road. He turned to Rufus. 'Tell me about Atticus. You definitely reacted when I mentioned his name last night.' 'I'll let you be the judge' replied Rufus coyly, as they turned the final corner into the open marketplace of the Macellum, already bustling with temporary stalls amid the more permanent trader's buildings. 'Let's just say he's not the most popular man in this part of town.'

Rufus put his hand across Caradoc's chest to slow him. He pointed to a building at the far end of the open square. 'There'. He said. 'My offices are just here, so I bid you farewell and wish you luck with Atticus. Be careful my friend.' Caradoc thanked him again for his hospitality and advice, and began to walk slowly towards Atticus' building. It was one of the largest in the macellum, and almost an emporium by itself. A well painted and slightly garish sign outside proclaimed the building as 'Atticus' Grain Warehouse'. Caradoc ruefully considered that this Atticus, whatever his connection to the robberies, was hardly keeping a low profile.

A few traders were busying themselves in the entranceway, talking to the salesmen and no doubt haggling furiously for the best early morning prices. Caradoc's attention was taken by the two large men standing either side of the doorway. They were taking no interest in

the haggling process and were clearly not being employed for either their business acumen or their ability to woo potential customers with witty conversation. They made no move to stop Caradoc as he entered the building, and he had to stop himself gasping as he realised the scale of the building and the quantity of grain sacks stored within. Mountains of them lined the walls and formed inner columns. Thousands of sacks, all available to the highest bidder and all of the profits going into the Atticus' purse. Moving backwards, Caradoc noticed two figures at the rear of the store. One was a tall figure with sleek, dark hair, noticeable for the toga he was wearing. Such formal costume was unusual to see in a market environment. He had his back to Caradoc. The man he was talking to was much shorter, and much rounder. He had a swarthy complexion and a large bulbous nose below a pair of beady eyes and a mop of curly, greasy black hair. He was grinning disingenuously, obviously keen to assure the togate man of something. The togate man turned abruptly and began to stride out of the building. Something in his expression told Caradoc that he wasn't unhappy to be ending the conversation.

Caradoc walked across to the smaller man. He took a chance. 'Excuse me. Are you Atticus, the owner?' The man turned, and spoke with a strong Mediterranean accent and a boisterous enthusiasm. 'I am! Welcome to my warehouse. Are you buying or selling?' Caradoc had had chance to prepare a flimsy cover story, and pretended to be a freedman there to enquire about prices. 'Buying' he replied. 'I'm here to get prices for my employer's estate. We need 50 sacks.' '50 sacks, you say?' That's a lot of grain. I can certainly give you a good price for that.'

After a brief but insincere round of haggling, Caradoc managed to slink away without revealing details of his fake employer's estate or

giving any commitment to buy.

Atticus, he mused, was clearly a businessman who thought a lot of himself. He was arrogant, haggled hard and protected his interests by force through hired thugs. Being an arrogant Mediterranean trader wasn't a crime as far as Caradoc was aware, though he wasn't entirely convinced it shouldn't be. The hired thugs were a potential link to the gang stealing from the granaries, but most merchants hired some form of muscle to guard their interests. As he walked towards the town gateway, however, Caradoc couldn't help but question where the mountains of grain inside the warehouse had come from. Finding evidence that it had been stolen from Lindum's granaries, as he now suspected it had been, would be difficult to prove.

## XVIII

Caradoc didn't enjoy the familiar feeling of being jostled around on his ox cart, though he was pleased to be slowly making his way home again. His thoughts turned to Justinus, Priscus and his shop all waiting for his return.

The journey back proved no more comfortable than the outward leg, but passed without incident. Caradoc stopped again at the inn that had stolen from him, but only long enough for his ox to leave a steaming present outside the front door. Caradoc couldn't help but grin at his puerile revenge as he plodded on his way.

His heart lifted when he neared Lindum, and saw the gleaming city walls towering on the hillside. He had decided not to risk travelling too late the previous day and stayed over one more night on the road. He was therefore arriving just before noon, with the summer sun high in the sky and baking his shoulders.

He reached the familiar junction where Ermine Street and the Fosse Way joined and began going up the street that led to the city gates, though Caradoc's journey would finish at his shop, outside the city.

He pulled the cart into an empty courtyard and had still not seen anybody by the time he had finished unharnessing the ox. He found his own shop entirely empty, but looking clean and well looked after. He went next door to Sempronius' bakery and stood at the shop counter. There, with his back to him, Justinus was helping Gaius Sempronius remove a batch of loaves from the oven. Neither of them noticed Caradoc as he walked up behind them and suddenly

said 'perhaps we've found your true calling after all!' Justinus nearly dropped the bread on the floor as he turned in surprise, his face lighting up at the sight of Caradoc. He ran around the counter and flung himself at his master, who couldn't help beaming at this warm welcome home.

That evening Caradoc sat in the caupona with Priscus and Lucius Sempronius, sharing a large grilled fish that they had ordered to celebrate his return. He told them both what he had discovered in Ratae. Lucius had not been aware of events up to that point, and was shocked to hear what had happened. When the name Atticus was mentioned he sat bolt upright, and then revealed that most of the bakers in the area were buying their grain from him, and at higher than normal prices due to the shortage. Caradoc silently cursed himself for not thinking of asking Sempronius earlier.

The next morning, Caradoc was relaying the same update to Nodens in the Prefect's office, but was disappointed to find the Prefect shrug off his experience of meeting Atticus. 'We'll never prove anything against him, and the Prefect at Ratae is unlikely to appreciate such an invasion into his jurisdiction. 'Leave Atticus alone' was his brief and dismissive opinion. It was with some dejection that Caradoc trudged back home to his workshop.

## XVIII

The molten metal slowly oozed into the channels of the mould as Caradoc gently poured it from the crucible. Setting the hot vessel aside, he glanced down at Justinus, who was staring transfixed at the process, his head leaning ever closer to the molten metal. Caradoc smiled and gently pushed the boy's head back to a safer distance. The boy was proving his worth and would shortly be allowed his first attempts at pouring the molten copper. It was a costly and potentially dangerous activity should something go wrong, but Caradoc was sure that the boy's hard work and attentiveness over the past months had earned him the chance.

Three weeks had passed since Caradoc had made his trip to Ratae, and the episode had almost passed entirely from his mind. There had been no further thefts and no contact from Nodens. Caradoc found himself with a lot of orders to complete, and with Justinus' help the coin pot under the floor was getting fuller by the day.

'Come on' Caradoc said. 'Let's go and deliver those nails to Venutius the carpenter. While we're in that part of town, I heard that the White Swan has some particularly tender rabbit at the moment. Let's grab some stew for lunch.'

Justinus carried the basket of nails as they walked side by side towards the city gate. The regular guards on duty were now used to seeing Justinus on his errands and generally left him alone. Although they might occasionally still tease him when he was on his own, they would not try such antics in Caradoc's presence and the pair passed through simply exchanging pleasantries.

After a pleasant stroll to the north western corner of the upper city, the business with Venutius was concluded quickly. They were soon both sat at a street side table in the White Swan, looking hungrily at the owner, Bellona, as she brought them the jug of water they had ordered, and two large bowls of rabbit stew.

Although the bowls were large and the stew thick, Justinus tucked in with gusto and had soon finished it all, his healthy appetite a consequence of his time living rough on the streets. He sat back with a satisfied smile across his face and smacked his lips. Caradoc was still finishing the final few mouthfuls of his when he stopped suddenly and stared across the street. Justinus followed his gaze. 'What is it?' He asked. Caradoc spoke slowly, eyes still fixed. 'Do you see that group of men across the street? The large group, talking to the two guards.' 'Yes' replied Justinus cautiously. Caradoc continued, almost to himself, 'the short man at the front with the colourful cloak on is Atticus, the grain merchant I saw in Ratae. What's he doing here in Lindum?'

Justinus peered closer. The group were standing about 30 feet away, close enough to recognise but not to hear what was being said. 'I recognise the guard he's talking to.' Explained Caradoc. 'His name is Florianus. He's one of the men who Nodens always has with him.' As they watched, a small package was discreetly passed from Atticus to Florianus. Nobody else in the busy street noticed, but Caradoc certainly did. 'We have to find out what was in that package' he said, and turned to catch Bellona's attention to pay their bill. As he turned back he heard a scraping of wood and saw Justinus scampering into a nearby crowd of people, heading in the direction of Atticus.

**XX**

Justinus mingled nonchalantly with the crowd outside the fish stall next to the caupona, watching Atticus carefully. Their deal obviously concluded, Atticus and his entourage began to walk away towards the southern gateway. Florianus and his colleague walked north. Justinus had a quick decision to make. He could only follow one group. He decided to heed Caradoc's words and follow Florianus and the mysterious package.

The two guards were clearly in no hurry and sauntered along the street so slowly that Justinus struggled to follow them without catching up. Once he had to pretend to be looking at some wooden buckets on a stall for so long the owner became suspicious and tried to hit him with a broom. Thankfully the commotion didn't attract the attention of the guards, who were attempting to flirt with a young flower seller at the time.

Despite this potentially disastrous setback, Justinus was an effective stalker. His time on the streets had taught him to move quietly and use crowds as cover. Previously, the person he followed would find themselves missing a purse by the time they returned home. Justinus never told Priscus about his pickpocketing and if his father suspected, he had never said anything, though Justinus knew he would be outraged. Justinus smiled to himself that at least his time he was trying to catch a criminal rather than being one.

The guards' slow progression took them to the basilica, as Justinus had been beginning to fear it might. Once they went inside the building it would be difficult to follow them without looking

suspicious. As a young boy, he was likely to be booted back out onto the street simply for being there.

They entered the open courtyard of the forum and began to cross it. Justinus was relieved when, once they reached the basilica, Florianus waited outside while the other guard went inside. Florianus leaned against the basilica's thick wall and folded his arms. Justinus secreted himself behind one of the great columns that supported the forum's western colonnade and waited.

The wait didn't last long. After a few minutes, a figure emerged from the basilica and walked to where Florianus waited. At his approach the guard moved away from the wall and stood more respectfully. He pulled the mysterious package from under his cloak and Justinus, peeking cautiously around the column, saw that it was a leather pouch. The newcomer took the pouch quickly and opened its flap. He tipped a portion of its contents into his hand and laughed hoarsely, before putting wrapping the pouch back up and slipping it inside his own tunic. He gave a brief order to Florianus and they separated, Florianus walking away across the forum and the recipient of the pouch retreating back inside the basilica. Justinus leaned his head back against the column, his heart pounding. The pouch had contained a large amount of gold coins, coins that had been given to a man that Justinus had only met once before, but recognised immediately. The city's Prefect, Gaius Valerius Nodens.

## XXI

Caradoc, Priscus and Lucius Sempronius sat in silence. Caradoc had both hands around his wine beaker and was staring at it as if divine inspiration would suddenly appear within the liquid. The gentle background noise of the caupona seemed louder than usual.

Priscus was the first to break the glum silence. 'We have to do something. At the very least we have to tell someone. Nodens, the city Prefect, is taking payments from a grain merchant. He's clearly involved in the granary thefts.'

'Who do we tell?' asked Lucius Sempronius wryly. 'Caradoc and I have been here before. Corrupt officials are dangerous men. We can't just start accusing them openly without solid proof, and who knows who is working with them? We can't risk telling anyone, not even Verecundus, who helped us before.'

Caradoc sighed. 'Lucius is right. Nodens will explain the payments away and we'll find ourselves visited by his guards, or worse, Atticus' heavies.' 'But we can't just do nothing' insisted Priscus. 'Nodens knows we know about the thefts. More importantly he knows Justinus is the only witness. We're not safe even if we forget the whole thing.'

Caradoc and Lucius looked at each other. Lucius nodded. 'Priscus is right. If Nodens has any suspicions we're onto him, he'll act. We need to find more proof.' All three men nodded solemnly before Priscus said, 'Then the only question that remains is how.' Caradoc looked up at him. 'I think the answer lies in your son's hidden talents'. 'For

metalworking?' asked Priscus , confused. 'Oh he'll turn into a fine smith I have no doubt. But the talents I'm talking about were honed long before I ever met him. The way he followed that guard told me he learned a lot on the streets that you're not aware of. If we're going to find out what's going on and get enough evidence to incriminate Nodens, we need Justinus to follow him and find out the truth.' Priscus, not usually a heavy drinker, emptied his almost full beaker in one gulp.

## XXII

Gaius Valerius Nodens paced up and down his study, hands tightly clasped behind his back, head bowed. As he heard the first squeak of the door moving on its hinges he stopped, his head snapping attention to the person entering. It was his secretary. He stood in the doorway. 'Well?' demanded Nodens impatiently. 'Is he finally here?' 'Yes Sir. He's in the atrium.'

Nodens pushed past the secretary and marched down the corridor into the light and airy atrium, though his arrival only seemed to make the room much gloomier. The small man waiting for him stood up and gave a deep bow at his entrance, spreading his arms wide. Nodens withdrew a leather pouch from his tunic and waved it at the man as he approached him. 'I trust that this is some kind of simple administrative mistake that you're here to correct?'

The man tilted his head to one side placatingly as he replied, his accent betraying his Greek heritage. 'My Lord, my master knows that, as a business man yourself, you will understand. He has not been able to make the profits he intended, so he has to reduce your payment as well.'

Nodens reacted angrily. 'I don't care whether your master makes a fortune or burns in Hades, my cut of this business venture is non-negotiable.'

The smaller man stammered slightly. 'My Lord, be reasonable. The amount my master gives is still a huge sum. He hopes that in time profits will increase again and he will be able to return to your

previous levels of payment...' Nodens cut him off before he could finish. 'MY master is a far less patient man than I am, which is something YOUR master would do well to remember. Tell Atticus that I expect the remainder of the money by the kalends or our little arrangement will come to an unhappy and premature end.'

Without waiting for the reply, he turned and strode back out of the room, leaving Atticus' negotiator to make his own way out.

## XXIII

Justinus crouched behind the wooden crate, pretending to remove a stone from his sandal. Peeking around the corner, he saw that the woman was still standing at the stall, haggling over the price of some vegetables. Leaning back against the wooden crate, he sighed to himself. He'd been following various members of Nodens' household staff around the city for the last few days, but with nothing to show for it other than a painful bruise on his arm when he'd had to quickly duck into a shop the day before and banged it on a table.

The slow progress this kitchen girl was making in buying a few groceries was one of the most tedious of all. Justinus was starting to doubt that any of the household staff were involved in the slightest with their master's criminal activity.

An hour later, when he'd tailed the girl back to Nodens' house after a seemingly endless detour via a sandal seller, he gave up and walked back to Caradoc's workshop. Caradoc and Sempronius were talking in the back room when they heard Justinus return. The look on his face told them all they needed to know about how successful he had been. 'Cheer up lad.' Said Caradoc. 'Tomorrow's the start of the Vestalia festival. We might not have any more luck, but at least we might have more fun!'

## XXIII

The festival of Vestalia was one of Rome's most ancient religious ceremonies, faithfully observed in the early days of the Colonia as a symbol of the citizenship of its residents and their strong cultural links with Rome. The festival was in honour of Vesta, and traditionally in Rome the Vestal Virgins would open the doors of their sacred temple, allowing women to process solemnly inside barefoot and make simple offerings to the goddess. Over time the nature of the ceremony had changed and the festival was now more associated with bakers, as the Vestals traditionally hand-made a special bread for the occasion. In Lindum, the festival now took the form of a lively street procession in which the leading women of the city took a prominent role, and the bakers gave out free bread to the people, subsidised by the Curia.

Caradoc, Priscus and Justinus made their way slowly through the city towards the forum, the heart of the celebrations. Lucius Sempronius, aided by his son Gaius and his daughter Gaia, had set off much earlier to set up their street-side stall with the other members of the bakers' guild. Although they would try to see them, the Sempronii would be kept very busy by the crowds all day.

As they slowly shuffled with the crowds between the huge sandstone columns of the forum and entered the open area, Caradoc looked to his right, towards the basilica. On a temporary dais, members of the Curia stood, raised above the crowds and dressed in formal togas, saying words of welcome and greeting familiar citizens. Caradoc scoffed to himself gently. This event was as much about the Curia promoting themselves and their business contacts as it was about

the people, or even Vesta for that matter. To the right of the men of the Curia he noticed Nodens, whose official duties would include ensuring order was maintained. As Caradoc watched, a slave approached Nodens and whispered something to him. Unnoticed by all except Caradoc, he quietly slipped off the dais and towards the forum's exit.

In the bustle of people, Justinus turned to his father and asked, 'have you seen Caradoc? I'm sure he was here with us just a moment ago.'

## XXV

Pushing his way through the crowds, Caradoc was determined not to let Nodens out of his sight. Thankfully, as he forced a young woman aside and stepped clear of the worst of the crush, he could still see the Prefect ahead of him. They were heading in the direction of the north gate. As Caradoc walked, it occurred to him that Nodens might simply be doing his duty and checking on his men. He shrugged the thought out of his mind. He couldn't risk missing an opportunity to catch Nodens in the act.

Nodens approached the triple archways of the north gate and headed towards the left hand pedestrian opening. He nodded to the guard on duty but made no more attempt to communicate with him as he walked past and outside of the city. There were no guards outside of the walls for Nodens to inspect, no city officials or public buildings. Caradoc's suspicions about what Nodens was doing grew as he followed him through the gateway at a safe distance.

People were still coming into the city, but the crowds moving along Ermine Street were nothing compared to those already inside the great walls. Caradoc kept his distance from Nodens, but the Prefect didn't turn around to see if he was being followed. The street outside the gates was lined with tombs, and without warning, Nodens suddenly darted off the road between two large mausolea. He moved so swiftly, Caradoc almost lost sight of where he was.

Quickening his step and stooping slightly, Caradoc moved to the front of the mausoleum and flattened himself against its wall. An elderly lady walking past gave him a quizzical look, as if she thought

he were too old to be acting like a child playing hide and seek. He grinned at her and she turned away, continuing her journey along the road.

Turning his attention back to Nodens, Caradoc peeked cautiously around the corner of the structure. Nobody was there. Caradoc wasn't surprised. The gap between the two mausolea was visible from the street. The back of the neighbouring tomb, though, would provide some secrecy. Caradoc smoothly and quietly moved towards it, and could immediately hear whispered voices. Two men were talking. One must be Nodens but he had no idea who the other was. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but couldn't risk moving closer for fear of discovery. The voices stopped. Caradoc realised with a jolt that he had left himself exposed. If they came around his side of the mausoleum they would walk straight into him. He held his breath and prayed they both went the other way.

## XXVI

'Then what happened?' Urged Justinus. 'Calm down lad, give the man space', Priscus chided his son, pulling him away from Caradoc, who sat on the bench in his workshop, a beaker of goat's milk in his hand. Caradoc chuckled. 'Fortuna smiled on me.' He said. 'Both men walked around the other side of the mausoleum, which gave me time to slip round to where they had been standing. Nodens walked back towards the city gate, the other man...' He gulped a drink of milk. 'The other man walked away to the north.'

'So who was he?' asked Priscus. 'If you saw him, he could be the link we need to work out what's going on. Even to bringing Nodens to justice.' 'I saw enough' said Caradoc mysteriously. 'He wore a cloak and a hood, but I saw him turn to look after Nodens. I saw a flash of his face. The man that Nodens met is the man he's working for. A former member of the Curia called Lucius Norbanus Aemilianus.'

Lucius Sempronius had been sat quietly in the corner of the room, but gasped loudly at the mention of the name. Priscus turned to him, 'Who is this Aemilianus?' Sempronius looked at Caradoc, who nodded, indicating that he should explain. 'A former priest of Minerva and senior member of the Curia. He was a respected man in the city until he was found to be leading a gang of thugs called the Nemean Lions. He stole an Imperial scroll to discredit a colleague and kidnapped my daughter. We all thought he'd fled the city in disgrace.' Caradoc stood up. 'It seems like he's working with Nodens to get his revenge. If we can find something to link the two of them,

then the Curia will have no choice but to believe us about Nodens.'

## XXVII

Justinus looked nervous as he and Caradoc walked through the lower city streets towards Noden's private house, which was located just inside the eastern defensive wall. It was a desirable part of town and as they neared their destination, both commented on the increasing size of the properties, the grander architecture, and the looming perimeter walls. Caradoc and Justinus were each carrying a basket of domestic ironwork. The street was quiet as they approached the gate to Nodens' house. In keeping with his status, personal wealth and political ambitions, the house was in a continental style, mimicking those found in Rome itself.

At the entranceway was a small porter's lodge. Getting past this gatekeeper would be the first challenge. They already knew that Nodens wasn't at home. Priscus had been watching the house since early that morning, and had run to tell Caradoc as soon as Nodens had left to go to the basilica. The second part of the plan could now begin.

Caradoc rapped on the door, which opened immediately. Lifting the basket up, he made sure he spoke first. 'I have a delivery of metalwork for the Prefect' he said confidently, positioning himself within the doorway. The door porter stuttered. 'I wasn't aware of any deliveries due today, and the Prefect is out at the moment.' Caradoc frowned. 'I was told that this was urgent and I've worked all night to finish this order, I'm not leaving without delivering it.' With that he barged his way past the porter and began to stride into the house, Justinus trotting obediently at his heels. The porter, clearly unsure what to do, hurried after. 'Well' he stammered, 'Maybe you

had better leave the goods after all. Wait in here, please, while I fetch the Prefect's secretary.'

They were ushered into a neatly decorated side room and the porter left. Putting their baskets down, Caradoc turned to Justinus. 'You know what to do? You have to find Nodens' study and look around to see if you can find anything to link him to Aemilianus, Atticus or the grain thefts. If anything happens, just run.' Justinus nodded, and slipped out of the doorway. Left alone in the room, Caradoc suddenly felt apprehensive about the whole ruse.

## XXVIII

Justinus was grateful to find much of the house devoid of occupants, but after looking inside half a dozen rooms, he still hadn't found any of Nodens' personal spaces. He was now on the edge of an attractive peristyle garden with rooms leading off it from a colonnaded walkway. He pressed himself behind a column while a slave carrying silver serving dishes passed him, then moved silently into the nearest room. It was empty, apart from a few old pieces of furniture in storage. The next two rooms also proved fruitless, one a guest bedroom and the other somewhere that, judging from the dice and counters on the floor, some of the slaves liked to hide in when they weren't needed.

Coming cautiously out of this room and closing the door behind him, he moved to the next. He began to feel sick in the pit of his stomach at the time that was passing with each failure to find the study. He thought of Caradoc buying him time with their delivery charade. The next door seemed promising. It was better quality than the others, a deep red-coloured wood and brass handle that looked high quality but well used. As he reached out to turn it he heard a noise from the other side of the door. Reacting quickly, he flattened himself to the wall beside the door so he was hidden behind it as it opened. He heard two slaves emerge from the room, grumbling about the tidying that they were doing and fought to hold his breath. The door swung closed, leaving Justinus exposed and in clear view against the wall. Thankfully, the slaves were walking away in the other direction and he remained undetected.

He had gone inside the room before realising that he was still holding

his breath. A small window in the far wall provided enough light for him to see the contents of the room. Shelves with scrolls and wax writing tablets lined the walls. A desk in the centre contained more of the same alongside a small array of oil lamps and a single, expensive looking bronze candlestick. Justinus quickly went to the desk and began to hunt through the documents, briefly scanning the contents of each one to the best of his ability. Although he could not understand all that he was seeing, and the handwriting on some of the tablets was difficult to read, by the time he had looked at everything on the desk he was confident that he hadn't found what he was looking for.

He started on the shelves, flicking rapidly through varied household accounts and correspondence relating to the Curia. A box caught his eye, half hidden in the corner of a shelf. Lifting it onto the table, he carefully opened it. Inside were a pile of small scrolls and note tablets. He picked up the first one and opened it. He instantly knew that he had found what he was looking for. He pocketed the tablet and reached for another. As he did so the door suddenly opened and a man strode into the room.

## XXVIII

In the reception room, Caradoc was running out of ideas to keep the secretary distracted when he heard the scream, faint but undeniable. Dropping the fake order book he had been using to dupe the secretary, he pushed past him and ran for the door and down the corridor. Reaching the open peristyle, he had no idea which room the scream had come from. A slave stood to one side, dithering and unsure how to react to the sudden shout and the sight of Caradoc barrelling into the area. The look on Caradoc's face was such that he didn't even need to open his mouth to ask where the shout had emitted from, the slave immediately pointed to the study door.

The door was partially ajar and Caradoc burst in to see Justinus backed into a corner and Nodens advancing on him. The sudden entrance made Nodens turn in surprise. 'Caradoc!' He bellowed. 'What is the meaning of this? Why is your little rat stealing things from my house?'

'The game's up Nodens. We know about you and Aemilianus, and we know Atticus is paying you to make sure his thugs get away with the grain thefts.'

As Caradoc accused Nodens, Justinus moved to slip past the Prefect and rejoin his master. Nodens was fast, however, and caught the boy by the neck of his tunic, spinning him round in front of him. The movement was so fast that it took Caradoc a moment to realise that he had drawn a knife. A knife that was now pressed hard against Justinus' throat.

Caradoc held out a hand, blurting out, 'Don't do anything stupid', though whether he was talking to Nodens or Justinus even he wasn't sure. Nodens laughed callously. 'I should be the one saying that to you. Unless you want me to slit this little thief's throat?'

'Alright Nodens, you win. Just let the boy go and we won't say anything to anybody.' As he spoke, Caradoc edged slowly back towards the door, still holding a placating hand out. Nodens and Justinus were beside the desk. Although Nodens was holding Justinus tightly, the boy's right hand was free, and he reached out and grabbed one of the oil lamps from the table, flinging its contents up into Nodens' face in one fluid movement. In the split second it took Nodens to react, Justinus slipped down out of his grasp, but couldn't avoid the knife blade drawing a thin slice across the left side of his neck.

As the boy scrambled past Caradoc and out of the open door, he was aware of his master leaping forward and landing a vicious punch on the side of Nodens' head.

## XXX

Justinus' first thought was to escape the house and get help from his father and Lucius Sempronius, who would be waiting anxiously for their return. He ran through the peristyle and back down the corridor towards the entrance. A number of slaves were blocking his way, and he darted sideways down another corridor to avoid them. Unsure of where he was heading, he continued to run at high speed. Turning a corner, he hit a solid object and found himself sprawling back onto the hard floor. Looking up, Justinus was horrified to find himself staring at the huge figure of a man in a green tunic, with a large belt buckle that he recognised all too well.

The man grinned evilly and grabbed out at Justinus, who managed to scramble back out of reach. Clambering to his feet, Justinus began to run back along the corridor, aware of the man lumbering after him, his large frame seemingly filling the whole of the corridor. Terrified, Justinus was running blind, darting along corridors and past confused and frightened slaves, desperate to either escape the house or at least avoid running into any dead ends. The house was enormous, and Justinus was soon completely lost. Smaller and more nimble, he managed to keep ahead of the giant but the monster kept up his ceaseless, lumbering pursuit, pushing slaves out of the way like rag dolls when they stood in his path.

Heading through a dining room and out into a garden space, Justinus realised that he had reached the dead end he had been dreading. Panicked, he searched the plant-covered walls of the small enclosed garden for any gaps, but to no avail. He went back to the arch he had entered through, only to see the brute enter the room

and climb over the triclinium. The way back was blocked. Justinus backed away to the centre of the garden, towards the raised wall of the decorative well that stood there. He reached out behind him and held onto the cold, rough stones of the well head as the man advanced, his long, straggly black hair slicked against his forehead with sweat after his exertion, that evil grin once again spreading wide across his face.

## XXXI

The oil lamp smashed against the wall of the study, showering Caradoc in oil and ceramic fragments. Both Caradoc and Nodens were bruised and bloodied from their fight. Caradoc had the strength of a man who works with his hands all day long. Nodens had done a stint in the army. Both knew how to fight. Caradoc advanced on his opponent, who was trying to catch his breath behind the desk, his right eye visibly swollen. Caradoc's top lip was split and his nose bloody. He charged Nodens, lifting him off his feet and crashing them both into the wall shelves, some of which came away, covering them both in scrolls and wood. Caradoc landed a scrappy punch in Noden's ribs. Nodens managed to lift a foot and kicked Caradoc sideways, separating the two of them. Both got to their feet as quickly as they were able, and Nodens grappled Caradoc, trying to hold him in a wrestling lock. Caradoc, a few inches taller, managed to resist and landed another punch on Nodens' face. Nodens retained his grip on Caradoc's tunic, and raised a knee sharply into the blacksmith's ribs. Not expecting the blow Caradoc sank, winded, to the ground. Seizing the initiative, Nodens reached towards his desk and grabbed the bronze candlestick. Swinging it round in an arc he struck Caradoc across the forehead, sending him sprawling to the ground and almost knocking him unconscious. Disorientated, Caradoc lost sense of what was happening around him as the room swam in and out of focus. The next thing he felt was a thud on his chest as Nodens leapt on him, and the grip of the Prefect's hands squeezing his throat.

## XXXII

Justinus looked around in panic for a way out as the brute paced towards him. 'No escape for you, little rat.' He leered. 'Whatever you saw that night at the granary won't be bothering you much longer.'

He picked up his speed, arms outstretched as he loped towards the trapped Justinus. In desperation, Justinus waited until the last possible moment before diving forward, between the legs of the ambling giant.

Taken by surprise, the slow brute couldn't react fast enough to catch his leg as he scrambled through, then thudded into the low wall of the well. Justinus, on his feet in a flash, leapt onto his back, his momentum carrying them both forward. The big man teetered on the edge of the well before pitching forward head first into the blackness. Justinus scrabbled at the stones to stop himself falling in as well, and barely managed to latch his fingers on, thumping against the inside of the well as the brute fell beneath him, his shocked scream cut short with a sickening crunch and a splash.

Justinus summoned what was left of his energy to climb out of the well and collapsed on the grass, panting. Even if he had the energy, he had no desire to see if he could see the gruesome scene at the bottom of the well.

## XXXIII

Caradoc's hands groped desperately around him as Nodens squeezed his neck harder, a look of pure, manic hatred on his face. Caradoc's vision, already fuzzy from the blow to the head, began to darken. He tried to use his knees to throw Nodens to the side but to no avail. Still his fingers searched desperately for an object that might help him. His left hand came across something cold and hard. Wrapping his fingers around it, Caradoc took his chance and swung the object at Nodens with all that was left of his strength.

The pressure on his throat lessened. Nodens let out a gurgle and his eyes widened in shock. His hands left Caradoc's neck and went to his own. He was surprised to find his own knife, the one he had used to threaten Justinus, protruding from it. In panic he pulled out the knife, spraying Caradoc with blood before collapsing backwards.

Caradoc pulled himself out from under Nodens' body and slowly got to his feet. Nodens lay still. If he wasn't already dead he soon would be, and Caradoc had no desire to check.

He stumbled out of the study back into the peristyle, blinking in the light. As his mind began to unfog from his near-death experience he suddenly thought of Justinus. His stomach turned and he hoped that his young apprentice had escaped without incident. Unsure of where he might be, he couldn't leave the house until he knew Justinus had escaped, even though Nodens' corpse would soon be discovered and an alarm raised. Caradoc could not bring himself to deal with the fact that he had just killed a man. But not just any man. An important official. In his own home. His stomach lurched again.

He wasn't sure anyone else would believe Nodens' crimes or that Caradoc had killed him in self defence.

He quickly strode through corridors and rooms, not seeing a single servant or slave. They had either fled or were still hiding in terror. Coming to an open peristyle, he saw a small figure lying on the grass. Fearing the worst, he ran across. Justinus sat up as he heard someone approaching, and heard Caradoc swear. 'You had me worried for a moment there, lad. What happened? Are you alright?' 'I'm OK' said Justinus, clambering to his feet, 'Let's just get out of here.' He couldn't help casting a glance back over his shoulder at the well as they hurried out of the house.

They saw no more slaves as they left the house and walked quickly down the street. They walked in silence until they met up with Priscus and Lucius, who were waiting for them at the caupona. The look on their pale faces betrayed that they had feared the worst as time had gone on. Priscus gave Justinus a crushing hug and Lucius slapped Caradoc on the shoulder. Caradoc quickly told them what had happened with Nodens, and their faces dropped once more. 'Nemesis save us' muttered Lucius. 'We've murdered the Prefect in his own home. We'll be thrown in the river for this.' Caradoc's brain was whirring. 'We need to act fast and take the initiative. We can't wait for a slave to tell the guards and for them to come and find us. We need to go and tell our side of the story to the Curia. Even without any evidence, we just have to hope they believe us.'

Justinus coughed gently. The three men turned to look at him as he slipped his hand inside his tunic and pulled out a small wooden note tablet. 'I managed to take this before Nodens found me.' He handed it to Caradoc, who began to read it. 'Is it important?' he asked

hopefully'. A grin spread across Caradoc's face.

## XXXIII

Slumping back into his seat, Marcus Lipius Verecundus' face visibly turned pale. The note tablet made a gentle clunk as he let it fall out of his hand onto the desk. Caradoc sat quietly as he let the story he had just told sink in.

'He's back, Sir.' Caradoc said quietly. 'Aemilianus is back.' Verecundus scowled. 'It seems to me that he never really left. Nodens must have been working with him all along. A Nemean Lion in charge of the city's security! It's preposterous. How did we never see this before?' Caradoc tactfully remained silent.

'But Nodens is now dead, you tell me?' Verecundus continued. 'Dead by your hand in his own house. A very bad business. Criminal or not, corrupt official or not, it will be difficult now to persuade others of his guilt.' Without warning he barked out an order for a slave to enter. One was clearly on hand outside the room, as the door opened almost immediately and a tall Gaulish-looking slave entered. Verecundus gave him an order to immediately take a group of public slaves and secure Nodens' house. Under no circumstances were any of Nodens' household staff or any guards to be allowed in until the house had been searched. As the slave hurried away, Verecundus turned back to Caradoc and said, 'we can only pray that nobody sympathetic to Nodens' cause has destroyed evidence in the meantime.'

'So what do we do now?' asked Caradoc, fearful that he might still face reprisals for Nodens' death. 'Leave this to me.' replied Verecundus. 'You go home, gather your friends, and lock yourselves

in your shop with the shutters down. Don't show your faces until my men come to fetch you.' Somehow, Caradoc didn't feel completely reassured by the instruction.

**XXXV**

When the rap on the shutters finally came, it was three days later. Justinus was asleep, Caradoc and Priscus were playing dice half-attentively and Lucius Sempronius sat staring at the wall, lost in thought. The sudden noise, the first contact with the outside world there had been, snapped them all to attention.

Caradoc walked carefully over to the shutters. He was just about to speak when the loud rap came again, making him jump. A voice followed the noise, infiltrating their silent gloom. 'Caradoc? I'm here with news from Verecundus. Let me in.' Caradoc slid the bolt back on the door and opened it a crack. The chink of sunlight suddenly flooding the room made Priscus wince. The man cautiously stepped into the room and Caradoc closed the door behind him. 'So what's the news?' asked Caradoc grimly, ushering the man to a seat.

'We descended on the house immediately and found it in a complete state. Some slaves had fled, others just sat around looking shocked. Nodens' body was still lying in his study. We've no idea if any of the servants removed anything, but we found plenty of evidence of his involvement with Aemilianus and Atticus. We locked the doors and gathered all the staff up in a courtyard. We interviewed them one by one, under threat of torture. Most of them didn't seem to know much about what was going on, but enough were aware. They soon coughed up and told us everything. One odd thing though, was that one of Nodens' top thugs, a Gaulish monster called Baxus was at the house, but no one has seen him since. He must have escaped in the confusion.'

At this, Justinus squirmed in his seat, enough for Priscus and Caradoc to notice and turn to look at him. 'Something wrong lad?' Justinus looked nervous. 'Look in the well' he said quietly. Nobody had the heart to question him further.

As Verecundus' man stepped back out into the street, he turned back to them. 'Don't worry about this anymore. Nobody will cause you trouble over what happened. Aemilianus will hopefully get the message and leave the city alone from now on.'

As he closed the door behind him, Caradoc exhaled loudly. He couldn't believe that they'd heard the last of Aemilianus, but at least life could return to normal for a while. He looked at Justinus. He still had a lot more to teach the boy about being a smith.