

The lights had been dimmed in the auditorium, and this was Melissa's favourite time. Okay, perhaps auditorium was too grand a word for the little box room tucked into the middle of the exhibition, but with only the light from the projector she imagined it was her great stage. Then she could pretend she was presenting her stunning PhD thesis, rather than re-reading the script the museum provided. Sure the job was fun, but it hardly had the grandeur she'd been aiming for when she went into academia. As soon as that started paying properly, she'd drop the museum summer job.

*For now, however...*

"Afternoon, everyone!" she called with forced cheer as the voices died down with the spotlights. First thing in the morning this was the greatest job ever; by four thirty she wanted nothing more than to stop smiling and have a drink. "Now then, has everyone here heard of... the Romans?"

Melissa would always, until the day she died, have a special place in her heart for the adults that went along with kids' shows. There was always that one smart-arse sod who'd shout back 'who?', but it was so much easier to carry on when at least one grown-up in the room said 'Yes!' and encouraged the children to speak up as well.

This afternoon there were three of them, already legends after putting up with a day out, and as she tried to make eye contact with them all Melissa spotted the man at the back.

He must've entered just as the lights dimmed. If he'd been there earlier she'd definitely have noticed him. At first she thought he was one of the re-enactors, skiving off work, but there was something about him... His cloak wasn't right for one. It didn't match the ones the wardrobe department supplied. *But he's wearing a cloak. What, has he turned up in fancy dress?*

Either way, he wasn't one of the adults who'd spoken – either for or against her question – so for now she could ignore him.

“Well in that case,” she asked the crowd, leaning over to look into the faces along the front row, “can anyone tell me what the Romans did for us? Why should we learn about them now? It’s been so long!”

“Cos they had fights and they killed people by throwin’ ‘em to the lions and everyone cheered,” one very enthusiastic kid in the middle said. That got a round of applause from the rest of the kids, as that sort of topic usually did.

“Ah, you mean the gladiator matches?” *Totally off-script, but if that’s what they are interested in.* “Yes, very good, my young friend. But we don’t have gladiators these days? So why are the Romans still relevant?”

A pair of adults at the back – young, childless, far more interested in each other than the exhibition – were busy giggling to themselves, and Melissa could practically hear the quotes from the front. *If only the head of public engagement had actually had any public engagement in the last thirty years.* Thankfully someone else was in charge of the visual displays, otherwise the whole museum would be dry, dusty and completely out of touch.

For some reason Melissa felt her eyes drawn back to the strange man at the back of the room. Unlike all the others adults, whose eyes had glossed over or whose phones had come out, he was still paying attention. He looked as though he was actually learning, which was a damn sight more than the kids were doing.

*Who the hell doesn’t know about the Romans? Oh, maybe he’s from abroad. I wonder how much Roman history is taught in other countries?* That was a question for later, and Melissa had to drag her attention back to the room before the children lost all interest.

“Well now, did you know that two of the months are named after Romans?” That got raised eyebrows from the man in the corner, and it was almost enough to get Melissa to lose her train of thought. A handful of the kids were also impressed, and Melissa directed her next words at them. “That’s right. August was named for a man called Augustus, so who do you think July was named after...?”

Even at that tender age they'd heard the name, and a kid in the middle of the room duly yelled the answer.

"Julius Caesar!"

Melissa had learnt, two summers ago when she first started at the museum, that invoking that name caused every child in a room to start talking at once. Some of them were making sure that everyone knew that they'd heard of him as well, others were talking about some part he'd had in a cartoon, and one or two even mention the Gauls. There was no point trying to get through to them at this stage, so Melissa just stood at the front and smiled, doing her part to encourage all of them to 'share the knowledge they'd learnt', as was the mission statement of the museum. They probably weren't meant to do it all at once, but it saved time.

As she had nothing to do right then, Melissa turned to the man at the back again. If his eager watching before had been off-putting, it was nothing compared to the anguish on his face now. The closest look to it that Melissa had ever seen in a museum was on the director's face, when a child had crashed into one of the displays. It actually looked as though the man was about to cry.

*Do I see if he's alright? But what the hell would I say? 'Sorry I mentioned Caesar'? It can hardly be too soon, for pity's sake!*

At a loss for ideas Melissa launched into her presentation, staying overly focused on the children as she did, despite the fact that she could feel the man in the corner watching her. Most of the talk was about Caesar; hardly original, but a famous name with lots of gory battles to his credit was the best way to hook children who'd had too much sugar or too much exercise. None of the subject matter was high brow, not like the many academic papers that she dreamed of giving, but it was a good, basic grounding in Roman history.

And of course, it ended with the gruesome murder of Julius Caesar on the senate house floor.

That part was always a crowd favourite, and sure enough a couple of budding thespians acted out the scene between the benches. The productions were cut short by an announcement over the tannoy.

“Attention, ladies and gentlemen, this is your five minute warning. The museum will be closing in fifteen minutes. Thank you.”

Melissa nodded at the adults in the room, dismissing them and their kids from her class. Truth be told she was done, and the sooner the place cleared out the better. It would still be ages before she could go home, but at least then she could stop smiling. Her cheeks were killing her.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, sir?” As Melissa turned her face fell, only for the briefest of seconds. It was that man, the strange one lurking by himself at the back. Up close he looked even more out of place, with a haircut that was just a little off. And he was definitely wearing a cloak, although he was doing his best to make it look normal. As he stared at the screen behind her, Melissa’s eyes dropped to his feet. She’d expected fluffy slippers or stilettos to complement the chaos going on with the rest of him, but he actually had sensible sandals on. Not the worst choice for midsummer, although always optimistic for Britain.

“I was just wondering... why?”

“Why what?” *Jesus, how out of it is this guy? It’s called a presentation, for education. Please tell me I don’t need to go that basic.*

“Why do you remember that? Of everything that he did in his life, why do you only remember those things?”

“What?” The weight of his voice, the seriousness of his frown and the sadness in his eyes made Melissa’s blood run cold. Of all the things she’d expected, a heavy philosophical debate wasn’t one of them. She wasn’t sure she was paid enough for this. No help was coming though, and if she could just hold him off for a while he’d have to leave when the museum closed. “Well... um... I mean... this isn’t everything we remember about them. This is just for the children, a

little introductory piece. The idea is they get engaged with the subject and go on to learn lots of other stuff.”

“You remember more about them then?”

*What is that accent?* It had a certain abruptness to it, but it wasn’t German. *Some regional accent perhaps?* “Of course. Um-” As was always the way, as had happened in every PhD interview she’d ever had, Melissa’s mind went blank. ‘Romans killed people’ was all her brain could think of there and then. “Alesia! We’ve got battle records for Alesia, and-”

“That’s for him,” the man said. “What about the others?”

“Others?” Melissa turned and followed his gaze. The last slide for her presentation was still up, with the artist’s portrayal of the assassination of Caesar. “You mean the conspirators?”

“Is that all they’re known as? What about their lives, their histories, their legacies?”

“For most of them, being one of the assassins of Caesar *was* their legacy.”

“But they brought down a tyrant. Why aren’t they remembered as heroes?”

“Well... it’s hard for us to take a side either way. It was a long time ago.”

“But all the children knew them as villains. They were siding with Caesar.”

“Caesar left one hell of a reputation. He’s a great person to aspire to, and he was an extraordinary individual. I guess it’s just easy to make him a hero.” *Because that’s how history works*, she wanted to say. *Because it’s written by the winners, and Octavian was the last man standing. If the conspirators had taken Rome, maybe it would be a different story. But one man against the senate, betrayed by his closest friends? Everyone loves an under-dog.*

But there was still that sadness in the man’s eyes, and as she watched a tear actually ran down his face. Melissa tried to follow his gaze, thinking it odd that he’d cry for the death of Caesar when he’d been asking why he was remembered. The man wasn’t looking at the fallen dictator in the image though; he was looking at the faces of the murderers, circling their dying prey.

“They were good men,” the man said at last. “Loyal men. They knew what the Republic was.”

“Sir...”

“They deserved better than this. He was supposed to be forgotten, not idolised. They were good men.”

Still muttering to himself, the stranger walked away. Though he’d only looked to be in his forties, he now walked with the heavy, weary tread of someone much older. Someone tired and spent. Someone in mourning. He disappeared around the door of the presentation room.

In the void left after the man’s departure, Melissa shivered. It was only now that she realised how much colder the world had felt near the man, and the strange smell that had accompanied him. *Everything* about that man had been strange, and Melissa was quite prepared to sit in that box for as long as it took to make sure he was well and truly gone.

“Melissa? You still here?” The loud, gruff voice made her jump after the stranger’s weird melody, but she smiled at the familiarity.

“Here, Nick.”

“Come on, what’re you waiting for?” Nick the security guard leant round the doorway and tapped his watch.

“I was waiting for the last one to leave.”

“They’ve been gone five minutes. And you haven’t even gotten the projector off yet!”

“No, one of them just left. Didn’t you see him? Quite a short man, dressed *really* weirdly.” As she described him Melissa snuck up to the door and peered out into the exhibition. There were a few other booths, but the path to the front door was clear. The man would still be visible, walking towards the exit.

Except he wasn't. It was just like Nick had said. Everyone else had gone. The cleaners already had the mops out, and they watched like hawks to get started as soon as the public were gone.

"Haven't seen anyone," Nick said. "You sure you didn't just lose track of time?"

"No, I swear. He was just here." *I can still hear his voice. I can still smell that old, musty reek. I can still feel the chill around him.* "Whatever. I won't be a minute, just get this packed up."

"Righto."

Despite the relief when he'd appeared minutes earlier, Melissa was glad that Nick left again. That way he couldn't see her hands shaking as she tidied up. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't convince herself that the meeting with the man hadn't happened. It had been real, as real as the benches, as real as the museum.

At last she went to turn the projector off, but before she flipped the switch her gaze was drawn to the figures in the image. The conspirators, most of their names lost to time. Many of those whose name had survived were only known for the assassination of Caesar.

*Who had they been? What had they dreamed? What had they achieved?*

"I'm sorry," was all she could say, before she cut the power and the image went dark.