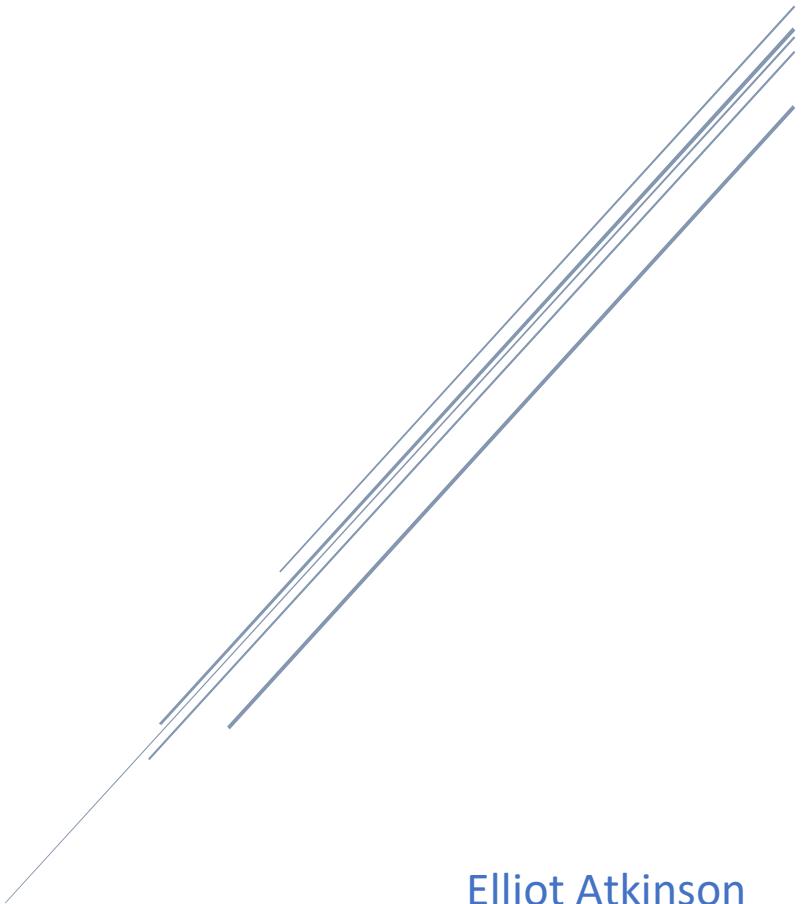


IMPERIUS



Elliot Atkinson

Chapter 1

Marcus walked up to the front steps of the *senatus*. He was a short young man with dishevelled brown hair, and kind brown eyes. He wore a white toga, with a small belt, and leather boots. He was also a senator. Behind the steps stood glorious marble pillars that held up a facade ceiling. The senators didn't want to get wet after all. Even then, the only thing that the senators complained about with the building was the facade. When the architectus designed the building they all cheered, but a few weeks into use they noticed what they thought to be a large problem. Homeless people would camp out under it for shelter and warmth when it was raining. Whoever thought of it was smart, Marcus thought. If you sat in front of the door and to the side, every time the door opened you would feel a little rush of warmth. The *senatus* complained to Caesar, but he couldn't force them away. He issued

a decree that stated anybody caught sleeping there by the magistratus would be sent to jail. This did not work, as apparently, they thought the prospect of being in jail was better than being out on the streets, so more people showed up. Eventually, Caesar told the senators to stop, as there was nothing in his power he could do to stop them. That was on the list of topics for the *senatus* meeting that day, he noted. As Marcus approached the steps a voice stopped him in his tracks.

"I am surprised you are allowed to continue your senate duties, Marcus."

It was Claudio, a fellow senator. He sported a white toga, and around his waist was a brown belt with a knife holder on the right side. His knife was in the holder, and it had a gold hold, with embedded jewels. It was not illegal to carry a knife in *Latroma*. His white hair was combed backwards in a neat fashion, and he had a silver buckle on his sandals - a sign of wealth.

"After that stunt you pulled last time, I wasn't sure. I do believe Caesar was a fool to allow you to come to this meeting. If I was *rex*, *you* would be in jail for a life sentence. Although, crucifixion would be nice..."

"Ave, Claudio."

Marcus pushed through the revolving door into the vast atrium of the building. Paintings of the original Caesar adorned the wall, and Boticelli's The birth of Venus hung above the door to the *senatus* hall. A shrine to Jupiter was in the corridor there. The carpet was made of red silk, and a few desks were

around the edge of the hall. During the week, people would be allowed in here to submit questions, suggestions or demands to the senate.

On certain days, citizens of Rome would come in here to pay tax and to do the census. Rich and important citizens of Latroma would come in here for the Saturnalia festival party. He headed under the Botticelli painting and into the senate hall. Marcus went up the steps and across to his seat. "Didn't think you'd want to be late, especially to this meeting. You're known for your punctuality, Marcus," Tibernus, a senator in a booth on his right said. A spiked blackcurrant squash lay on the table in a convenient position for him to pick up. He smiled to himself. The *servii* always knew what he wanted from years of experience. They could tell just from how he carried himself what drink to prepare. He hadn't seen any today, but they could easily guess what he wanted. A blackcurrant squash was what he always had when he felt bad.

Suddenly, a fanfare blared on the in-seat immersive speakers. It felt as if it was playing right next to him. Everyone in the *senatus* stood up and saluted as a platform raised Caesar in the centre of the hall. Caesar was an aged man of 73 and was only 1.6 metres in height. His hair was gone apart from patches around his ears, and he was wearing a golden laurel wreath on his head. His face was very wrinkled, and he had a long, pointy nose. Caesar sat on a magnificent throne with a golden eagle the symbol of Latroma - on top.

"*Gloriosi Caesari*," they hailed. He saluted back and gave them permission to sit. Marcus almost collapsed back into his chair.

As Caesar sat on his plinth, Marcus sipped his squash nervously.

"So, on the matter of Marcus Flavius Gaius," Caesar said. Marcus gulped. This was it. He would be sentenced to death by Caesar himself.

"He shall go free with no punishments inflicted." Marcus couldn't believe it. He was not affected. A familiar shout came from someone lower down in the senate hall.

"Kill him, *rex!*" said Claudio. Caesar paid no attention.

"Are there any other matters we wish to discuss?"

A voice came through the speakers in his chair. It was a marvellous system. If somebody wished to talk, they would snap their fingers and their voice would come out of everyone's speakers. As well as this, you could also play quiet ambience music in your booth. Marcus preferred Beethoven's 5th symphony.

"I've had an idea for the homeless people sitting in front of the building."

"Yes," the *rex* replied.

"We shall bury them alive."

"I don't agree. We shall do nothing. Anyone more who complains shall be crucified." Silence came from the senators. The senators kept rambling on about matters that were simply mere annoyances. Finally, Caesar interrupted.

"Good. Now, there is one matter I wish to discuss. The uprisings in the east, in the area formerly known as China." Marcus spoke up.

"I believe we should send 1st Legion, and 12th Legion cohorts 3, 5 and 9 to the camp at Beijing. Set up night patrols and a 5:00 curfew, and shut down all factories, industrial buildings where the rebels may be hiding for the next month. If anyone finds extra information, and reports it to the Inquisition, they shall be rewarded 25 *sestertii*."

"Meticulous planning, Marcus Flavius. The senate is adjourned until next Sabbath, when we will celebrate the Saturnalia." Tibernius walked up next to Marcus.

"You got off lightly there, Marcus," he said." Next time you might not be so lucky."

"That I know. I shall be more careful."

"Good to hear. I've got to get back home now. Percivus is preparing a hearty steak to celebrate Saturnalia. A bit premature, but we're going away during, so he wanted to prepare one for us. He is an odd *servus*."

"So, I hear."

Marcus exited the senate building into the blinding light of day. The Sabbath market was out, and people were haggling for items. He strolled over to a stall and bought a little token of Minerva - his family goddess - on a necklace. He put it on and walked down the promenade. The Conquest Promenade was a lovely place. There were trees lining the side in front of the buildings, and a fountain in the Centre. On a warm, sunny day like that day, it was the perfect time to sit in a restaurant

and enjoy lunch. There was hardly a cloud in the sky, as he walked to Central Station. All throughout Rome, there was a hover train. As a senate member, Marcus was entitled to a personal cubicle. It was one of his favourite places.

He sat down in his chair next to the window and looked out. He jolted briefly backwards, as the train reversed, and then the train shot forwards. It took a while to get up to speed, but when it did, Marcus went over to the table and took out a book. It was a long one, and he always read it whilst travelling on the train. He became so immersed in it, he was startled when the train slowed to a stop. He had reached his destination. He left his private area and found himself in the Western Station Residential. It was a busy day, with many people making their way to the games in the Flavian Amphitheatre. Caesar was holding Saturnalia games there for two weeks, ending on the Sabbath day. As they passed, Marcus saw many people hurrying to get on the train before it left, as they needed to get tickets before they sold out. Others who had already bought tickets and had seen the programme were excited, as this was the day of the lottery. One group of people pointed excitedly at the list of prizes.

"*Ecce*," one of them said. "Look at that. A year's salary! We could get a *servus* with that much money."

"We already have a *servus*, dear," her husband said.

"What, Titus? No, a proper one. We only have Titus because he's old and can't find work." They hurried onto the train. Marcus strolled past the crowd heading towards the train, which was already quite full, and into the bright

sunlight. It took his eyes a while to adjust, and he entered Parkside. His house was only a short walk away.

"*Salve, Marcus,*" Antonius called. "Are you alright?" Antonius was Marcus's best friend. He ran a café in Parkside and got a lot of money from its residents. Marcus told Antonius everything, so Antonius was eager to hear how the senate meeting went.

"I'm fine, Antonius."

"Well, come in and tell me how it went."

Marcus walked into the café, and asked Antonius for a ham and cheese toastie.

"How did it go?" Antonius pressed. " You're keeping very quiet about it, which is suspicious." "It went fine. Caesar let me off without a punishment. However, Cladius recommended that I be killed." "Classic Cladius. I don't understand why he hates you. What else?"

"I recommended a plan for the rebels in Beijing. Sending out a few cohorts, shutting down factories, information rewards, that sort of thing. Oh, and Caesar said that if anyone complained about the homeless people they would be crucified."

"I bet the senators won't say much about that for the next year or two."

"Ha, you're right." By this time, Marcus had finished his ham and cheese toastie, and was getting ready to leave.

"How much?" Marcus asked.

"It will be 2 *as, please.*"

"See you later, Antonius. If you want to come around, 7 o'clock works."

"I shall make a note of it."

Marcus picked up his bag and walked out into the park. The time was approaching quarter past one, and people had started disappearing after lunch to go watch the games. Even from there, Marcus could a faint fanfare coming from the amphitheatre, which was impressive, considering he was a kilometre away. He meandered across the park, heading back to his villa, which he got for being a senate member. As he had no heir, after his death, it would be reclaimed by the state. Still, he was only young, about 29, and senators usually lived to be in their 70's.

He walked up to the gate. This was a security measure he thought unreasonable, but apparently Caesar thought it would be bad reputation if a senator's house got robbed. Marcus walked up to the keypad and entered his code. It then proceeded to scan his face to identify it was him. The gate slowly opened, and he stepped into the path of his front garden. He walked up the path, realising that the grass had been freshly cut, the flowers trimmed, and the apples collected off the trees. The public gardener must have come. He oversaw gardening all the green areas in the area, but when he found the time, he would visit people's houses, and do their gardens. This had been authorised by the council, so he could go into anyone's houses who hadn't opted out. Marcus's car was parked outside by the front door, and a few *servii* were giving it a small car wash and check over. It was a sleek blue car, with display on the windshield and integrated self-driving.

Marcus often preferred to have a *servus* sit at the wheel rather than trust the car.

"Salve, master. Back so soon? I thought that the trains would be jammed, what with the *Saturnalia* games and the Sabbath market," one of them called.

"Salve, Albus. Luckily for me, the meeting finished just before the rush. I even had time to pick up a Minerva token. Mater will like that. The next train after I left was packed though. One family hoped to win a year salary in the lottery, so they could afford a new *servus*. Would you like to come with me, and try to win something?"

"Oh, no. No, master. You see, I've already won the lottery."

"Have you really?"

"Yes, I work for you, and what else could I ask for?" "Well, don't let me bother you. You carry on. I'm going to give *mater* her present. Where is she?" "*In cubiculo.*" Albus replied. "*Gratias tibi.*"

Marcus had a large two storey house on top of a hill. You would enter through the foyer, and walk into the kitchen, which flowed into the living room and dining room. The garage was separated from the lounge room by a stylish brick wall. His car was usually kept in the garage, and it automatically checked itself for faults every month. A massive glass door/window separated the lounge room from the back yard, where a large banquet could be assembled. There were stairs to upstairs in the lounge room, which took you into a large viewing gallery/art display room, where you could just about see the amphitheatre. *Mater's* room was on the left, and his

was on the right, with a bathroom next door. The *servii*'s room was connected to the bathroom. On the back was a large bowling alley, which Marcus often let the *servii* play in. All the doors were open to keep cool. and Marcus went through the living room and up the stairs into his mother's bedroom.

"*Salve, mater.*"

"Hello, my dear. *Quis agit?*"

"I'm fine. I went by the Sabbath market, and I picked something up for you."

"Thank you. You didn't have to do that. What is it?"

"It's a small Minerva token I found. Happy early Saturnalia."

"Brilliant, dear. So, how did the meeting go?"

"*Optime*, actually."

"What did Caesar say?"

"I was let off without a warning."

"Amazing. Have you told Antonius yet?"

"*Ita, mater.*"

"*Bene*. So, shall we go out for dinner tonight, or have a feast here?"

"I think I'll stay here. I love Albus's cooking, and Antonius will be over at 7:00."

"The more the merrier. Have you had that talk with Albus yet?"

"*Minime*. I'll go do that now."

Marcus walked back downstairs to the lounge room, and sat down on the large, comfy sofa. The Scenic Views channel was playing on the large, flat screen TV. It was so high-quality

filming, that it could make you feel like you were at the place being shown. Right now, it was showing views from a beach resort in the Caribbean. Marcus had been there once, and it was a lovely place to rest on the warm, sandy beach.

"Albus, can you come in here, please?" asked Marcus.

"Coming, master," he called from outside.

The glass door separating the driveway from the kitchen opened. Albus stepped into the lounge room and sat on the sofa next to Marcus.

"You wanted to see me, master?" he asked politely.

"Yes, I did. Albus, I am going to set you free."

"No, no, master. I like working for you. Please don't stop me from doing that," he pleaded.

"I am not going to stop you. In fact, I would like you to continue working for me. Except, you will be paid and free to make your own decisions."

"Oh, thank you master. Thank you so very much." "So, here's 5 *sestertii* and buy yourself something nice. Oh, and Albus. Please be back by 7:00. I'm having Antonius over. We're going to have a feast, and it wouldn't be right without your cooking." "I will try, master."

Marcus decided to have a relaxing afternoon. He put a nice movie on the TV and did a few crosswords and Sudoku. He had a challenge where he, Tibernus, Antonius and Albus tried to do the daily crosswords from each newspaper the quickest. So far Marcus had only done one the quickest, and even then, it was because the others kept getting distracted by people wanting to talk to them, and they had forgotten to stop their

timers. He had just completed the Times in just under 5 minutes, and the Guardian in 8. It was around 3:30 now, and it was shady in the lounge room. The movie had reached the end and was displaying the credits.

A *servus* entered the room and stood by the kitchen counter. “*Salve, dominus.* You look like you are a bit hot. Shall I bring you a glass of ice water?” he asked.

“*Ita, gratias Tibi.* I’m going to come out to the yard now, actually. Have the others finished washing the car? It’s a wonderful day for it,” Marcus answered.

“*Nescio, dominus.* Shall I check?”

“*Minime.* Like I said, I’ll be going out there.”

The *servus* busied himself with making Marcus his drink, and Marcus made his way into the garden. The *servii* were getting the car into the garage.

“*Salve, Marcus. Quid agit?*” one of the *servii* asked. “*Me bene habeo.* You don’t need to put the car in the garage. I might have to pick up Albus at some point.”

“Oh, *ita. Ubi est is?*”

“*In urbe.* I set him free earlier and gave him 5 *sestertii*. I let him go and buy a present for himself. I reckon he’ll have caught the train. But 6:30, when he should be coming back to prepare for the feast, is just after the end of today’s games.

That means he’ll probably want me to pick him up at around 6:00.” “*Intelligo,*” replied the *servus*. He motioned to the others to leave the car where it was. They all nodded and stopped.

“What shall we do now?” One of them asked.

“I don’t mind. I’m going to be out here reading a book if you need me. Just please don’t annoy *mater*. I think she’s knitting.”

“*Bene, dominus,*” they replied in unison.

The *servii* shuffled off, and the other *servus* delivered Marcus his drink.

“Can I get you anything else, master?” he asked.

“No, I’m fine. I’ve got my book, my drink, and my phone in case Albus rings.”

“*Bene. I’ll* go and join the others. I think they’re bowling.”

“Tell them they will never beat my high score of 295.” “I will do. It must have been embarrassing losing that last strike.”

“It was.”

The *servus*, too, shuffled off, leaving Marcus alone in the front garden. He read his book for a while. It was called “A Short Story of the Roman Emperors and Their Acts: Part VII.” Although the books themselves were short, there was a lot of them, because there had been so many emperors. So far there were about 12. After about half an hour, Antonius messaged him. He said that he was coming over, and asked if he could bring his wife. Marcus told him that it was alright. He was good friends with Livia. She was brilliant at party games and tricks, as well as being able to start and end conversations, or even turn them into a new topic if it was getting a bit boring. She loved knitting, just like *mater* and they often competed to see who could knit a design the best. Often times, Marcus would get a lovely woollen scarf or hat as a present. He made a mental note to tell Albus to cook for four. He continued

reading his book as the world passed by. At one point he was aware of a few children playing football in the streets, only for them to stop as their parents gradually took them away for dinner.

Mater came down to check on him at around 5:30.

“*Salve,*” she said.

“*Salve,*” *Marcus* replied.

“What are you up to?”

“Not much. I’m just sitting and reading my book. I’m nearly onto the 9th one. I’m also waiting for if Albus needs me to pick him up.”

“You had that talk with him, then?”

“*Ita. He* was overjoyed when I told him that he could keep working for us.”

“As I imagine he would be.”

“Oh, and Antonius is bringing Livia around for *convivium*.”

“That’s brilliant. I found a new knitting project for us.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a nice, white mouse that you fill with this thing that you can buy from hardware stores, and then it works as a doorstop.”

“Cool. I’d rather like to have a mouse doorstop. And if it is nice, you can make more.”

“Exactly. “She turned around and made to leave.” Well, I won’t keep you. I’ll get back to my knitting. I’m making a rather stylish pair of gloves.”

Mater trotted off leaving Marcus alone. It was getting dark now. He took his rug inside and put it in a cupboard in the

atrium. He set the glass on the marble kitchen counter, next to the sink, then sat on the sofa. He just finished the emperor Aquilus, and was about to start the next one when his phone started ringing. It was Albus.

“*Salve,* Albus.”

“*Salve,* Marcus. The market is closing now, so can you come and pick me up? I’ll meet you at the *Publica Bibliotheca*.”

“I’ll see you there in about 10 minutes.”

“Great. *Vale,* Albus.”

“*Vale,* Marcus.”

He hung up. Marcus placed his book on the table in front of him.

“I’m going to get Albus! I’ll see you in a bit!” Marcus called.

“*Vale, care!*” *mater* replied.

Marcus went out the front door and went out to the car. It was dark by now, so he had to turn on his headlights as he drove out of the gate. The display had turned on, and it illuminated the entire windshield. He headed down the street out of Parkside, and onto the Roman ring road. Rome was divided up into areas, and if you wanted to change area you had to use the ring road. Marcus was headed from Parkside (Western Residential) to Eastern Central, so he had to take this route. At this time of night, there was hardly any traffic which made Marcus happy. The builders had tried to minimise congestion by choosing the quickest route between areas, but due to the number of commuters and tourists, traffic could mean an extra 40 minutes was added to your journey. He travelled for about 5 minutes, obeying the speed limit of 90 km/ eventually he

saw a sign pointing to his area destination, and so he pulled down the slip road and onto the high street. He passed the Senate building and the Conquest Promenade, which looked so pretty at night as well, second only to the *Caesar Fons*, a fountain built to commemorate 2000 years since the death of Julius Caesar. About 50 years ago, they added lights which turn on at night, and light up the fountain. On special days, such as New Year's Eve, there would be a spectacular light and water show, which was different every year. It was found outside the *Flavian Amphitheatre* often attracted gatherings of tourists all year round. Small groups of people slowly made their way down the Promenade, most likely heading back home or to their hotels after a day in Rome. A few stalls were still open, and people stopped to check out their wares. A *magistratus* paced around, reminding everyone that all stalls will close in a quarter of an hour, so that the residents are able to sleep peacefully. Marcus pulled up at the *Publica Bibliotheca* car park and waited for a minute checking the news on his phone before Albus showed up. Apparently there had been a violent shoot-out in Langfang earlier, and reinforcements from Beijing were stopped and killed by the *exercitus*. A thousand casualties had been recorded so far, and Langfang was put under quarantine, with daily house searches and food deliveries from the *magistratus*. Roman reinforcements had been sent to Beijing to aid in the conflict and protection of civilians. Marcus smiled. That had been his idea that Caesar had gone through with. He turned his phone off and put it in his pocket just as the door to the library opened, and Albus

stepped out. Pulling the door shut behind him, Albus entered the car park and stepped over to Marcus's car. He sat down in the seat next to Marcus with a nice bag filled with books and other things in his lap.

"So, Albus. What have you bought yourself?" Marcus asked, as he started driving.

"I got a few nice books about myths," he replied as he fiddled with the buttons to turn on seat warming. He usually had it at about 25°C. "I sat in the park for a while and read them. I enjoyed the chapter about Achilles in the first one. I also got a few things from the market. I got a nice silver watch which tells you the date," he pulled up a sleeve to show Marcus, "this lovely woollen jumper," he ruffled it to indicate that he was wearing it, "this bag, obviously," he lifted up the bag, which had a lovely picture of the Conquest Promenade, "and a nice water bottle. "He took it out of his bag. It had a flip up straw, and a chart to tell you how much water to drink.

"Lovely, Albus. I take it you spent all 5 *sestertii*?" "No, master. I had 1 left, so I put it in the bank. Why? Did you want it back?"

"No, Albus. I want you to keep all of it."

They now turned from the ring road and drove down the main street. His house wasn't far.

"You're going to have to cook for 4, Albus. Antonius is bringing Livia." "*Bene, dominus.*"

Marcus parked the car in the garage, and they got out into the lounge room, Albus carrying his things. "Put them down

over there, Albus." He pointed at the table. "And get to work."

Chapter 2

Albus hurried over to the kitchen and talked to the other. He then busied himself with the others getting ingredients out of the cupboard and preheating the ovens and getting the pots and pans onto the counter. Another *servus* chopped vegetables on the chopping board that he seemed to be about to set himself alight.

“What’s all this fuss about, then?” *Mater* walked downstairs to meet Marcus in the lounge room.

“The *servii* are preparing for the feast. Antonius and Livia should be here any minute now.” The doorbell rang almost immediately. “*Dico diaboli!* Well, I’ll go let them in. Make yourself comfortable, *mater*.” Marcus strolled over to the *atrium*, and opened the front door.

“Antonius! Livia! Come in, come in! I hear *mater* has a new knitting project for you to do,” Marcus greeted them. Livia was a tall woman with flowing blonde hair and striking blue eyes that could attract anyone’s gaze. She wore a thick, red coat, which made her look fatter than she was, because she was in fact rather thin, skin-tight black leggings, and polished leather boots.

“*Salve*, Marcus. So, what are we having for dinner tonight?” Antonius asked as he and Livia took their coats and shoes off. “*Non sum certus*. I think Albus wants to keep it a secret.” “Ah, I understand. Well, it’s Albus’s cooking, so I can’t complain,” Antonius said.

The trio walked into the lounge room, and Livia spotted Albus cooking.

“Hi, Albus,” Livia waved.

“Hi, Livia,” he replied, looking up from his cooking briefly.

When Livia first came to Marcus’s house, it was Albus who had greeted her at the door. Ever since, Livia made a habit of always saying hello to him. Marcus sat down on the sofa, on the opposite end to *mater*, and patted the space next to him to signal that they should sit down.

“Come, sit.”

Livia sat down next to *mater*; and they started talking about knitting techniques. Mater flicked excitedly through the pages of one of her books, with Livia pointed at a few of them as she did so. Albus was still busy preparing their meal, which left Antonius and Marcus to talk together.

“So, Antonius,” Marcus began. “Did you hear the latest news about the rebels in China?”

“*Ita, I did.*”

“I feel sorry for the innocent citizens in Langfang. It isn’t their fault.”

“Nobody knows the full extent of the rebels’ weapons. I’m worried Caesar will make the wrong decision and drop an atomic bomb on them, only to find retaliation.”

“I’m just glad that Caesar isn’t sending me there,” Marcus told him.

“Yes, he sends senators on a trip to a dangerous war, what could possibly go wrong?”

“Picking names out of a hat. Surely, he’d rig it so that he sends the people he hates the most, and then have their plane shot down by an air base.”

“It sounds a lot like Caesar,” Antonius agreed. “What started this war anyway?”

“It wasn’t discussed at the senate meetings, so I doubt anyone, but Caesar knows. He wouldn’t reveal to the public what he won’t reveal to the public,” Marcus replied.

“Unless by mistake,” Antonius countered.

“He’s made a lot of those.”

“You know what I don’t understand?” Livia announced.

“What?” asked Antonius.

“Why the picture on the coins changes every time we get a new emperor. It stops the mint crashing when everyone goes to get new coins, and they must make the old ones usable for longer. And during that time, no one can get a coin out of the bank.”

“Yes. And it can take over a year for the new coins to be circulated. And sometimes, the emperor has already died by that time. I say we keep the original Caesar on the coins, and be done with it,” Marcus agreed.

Albus walked over to the table holding platters upon platters of food.

“Your dinner,” he told them. He had cooked them a roast chicken, with Yorkshire puddings, a variety of vegetables including sweet potatoes, carrots, peas and broccoli, roast and mashed potatoes, and a nice and thick gravy. He laid this out

on the table in front of them and then put it onto their plates for them.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must go and prepare dessert.” Albus turned and headed back to the kitchen. Antonius chuckled, “If it will even fit in my mouth after all this!”

Mater nodded in agreement, “You’re right about that.” Marcus picked up the TV remote and turned it on. Suddenly the behemoth 95-inch screen flickered to life. He clicked through a few menus and turned on the Scenic Views channel.

“Just for a bit of ambience,” he explained.

Antonius tried to agree through a mouthful of food.

“Are you alright there, Antonius?” *mater* asked.

“I’m fine, Gratias.”

“I can’t believe Albus is making us dessert as well! I didn’t even ask him to do that! And this food is amazing!” Marcus exclaimed as he took another mouthful of food. *Mater* started to speak, “Although, Livia, not all coins have Caesar on. Some of the commemorative ones, like the 100 years since the Great war, or 1500 years since the Goths invasion of Rome, have the emperor at the time on, or simply no emperor at all.”

“That’s true. When the mint is struggling to get the new coins out, sometimes people use only commemorative ones, which is why there’s about a 5% chance that you will get one as change,” Antonius added.

“Assuming you even get change. Some small stalls, especially if they think you’re a tourist, won’t give you change at all.

Their excuse is usually along the lines of, ‘Business has been

a bit slow lately, so we don't have change to give you. If you come back in 2 weeks, I'm sure we'll have some. 'And of course, tourists rarely stay for more than 2 weeks. The only time I've stayed for more is when I'm there on senate duties,'" Marcus argued.

"Oh, *ita*, Marcus. How was the senate meeting today? Antonius told me that Caesar let you off scot-free," Livia asserted. "Well, for now. You know what Caesar's like. He announces that someone will go off free, sends them to someplace obscure with a little bit of unrest, gets their plane shot down by the Imperial Army, and blames it on the rebels," Marcus replied.

"I doubt he'd do that to you, Marcus. You're the smartest senator of the lot. You're level-headed, and you never make a claim or accusation without knowing enough facts, and when the rest of the senators are doing stupid things, like trying to get homeless people out from under the facade, you shoot them down with both barrels and leave them no room to argue or negotiate a compromise so they have to shut the argument down. If Caesar chooses to throw away that to get back at you and send a warning to the senate, he's a fool and an idiot if I ever knew one," roared Antonius.

"To Marcus," Livia called, and she raised her glass for a toast. "To Marcus," the others agreed, and they clinked their glasses together so hard that a lot of wine spilled onto the table before the glasses returned to their coasters.

"Guys,guys,"Marcus told them after the commotion had quietened down." I know and you all know too that Caesar is an idiot, and that he would certainly throw me away to warn the others."

"Well,Marcus,I believe that that's just because he doesn't realise that you are doing that for him. In that respect, Caesar can't even see past the end of his nose, so as far as he's concerned, if the argument stops, he must have stopped it. He needs your benefits so much that he doesn't even realise it; he doesn't even know that those benefits exist," Mater countered. "That's true," Antonius chimed in. "If I worked under a really snooty boss, who did no work at all and took the credit for all the work that they should be doing that I did, I would say the same thing. I might even demand a pay rise. But if they were to fire me, the whole regime would topple, and they'd be fired too. And if that person was the owner of the company, that company would soon go bankrupt. It's the same with the senate,Marcus. You are doing all the work for Caesar, but if he were to fire you, the entire senate would descend into mayhem, and Caesar would be ill-equipped to deal with it.If I'd had an emperor like that, I'd probably assassinate them myself. In a sense, you are the sole person holding up Latroma, but Caesar takes all the credit himself." At this point, the TV was interrupted to show a news broadcast. It showed a lady in the studio, in front of a large video screen displaying war footage.

"Breaking news," she said. "This is an emergency broadcast for all viewers. According to reports from the Imperial Army,

the rebels in Beijing have shown a small display of the amount of weaponry they have on standby. The rebels fired a mid-distance rocket carrying 150 tons worth of TNT at Pervomaiskii, a small town under the *civitas* of Russia at approximately 20:00. This marks a turning point in the battle, as places further than 200 km are also at risk. All towns in the surrounding 50 km radius are also being evacuated. The reinforcements that were scheduled to arrive in Beijing are now being redirected to Jizhou, adding an hour's delay to their arrival. The rebels have also captured Langfang, and have set up multiple hospitals and garages there, as it is out of the range of fire of the army. In a speech earlier today, the leader of the Imperial Army said that he hopes to set up a barricade around Langfang in order to stop vehicles getting in, and it will include anti-aircraft guns to prevent resources from entering. Civilians will still be directed to exits around the barricade to aid them in escaping the conflict. Currently, it is estimated that 250 thousand people have been wounded, and 50 thousand have been brutally killed. There is an estimated cost of 91 *aureus* in total repairs if the conflict ends in less than one week. That is all. *Senatus Populusque Romanus.*" At this point, it showed the symbol of *Latroma*, before returning to the original video. All this time, the gathering had sat staring at the screen. Mater broke her gaze first.

"Well, that was interesting," she said. "Luckily, we're in Rome, so unless they have more secret weapons we'll be fine." "Not entirely. If they've already captured Langfang in 2 weeks, they'll probably be able to capture posts closer to

Rome in 3 months. If that happens, they'll issue an evacuation order. I hope we don't have to go to Britannia. It's so cold," Antonius chimed in.

"Let's have a look at where the nearest long-range missile silos are that can hit us," Marcus suggested.

He picked up his phone and connected it to the TV. He then typed in his username and password to login to the private senate app. A screen appeared showing a menu on the left side, and a calendar taking up the rest of the screen. The next scheduled senate meeting was on the next Tuesday, according to the calendar. There was also one on the Sabbath. Marcus thought this odd, as senate meetings were only ever on the Sabbath. Upon closer inspection, Marcus realised that it was an emergency meeting, for discussions about the war. He tapped on the part of the menu that said 'World map' and at once the calendar was replaced with a large map. It showed Rome in the centre, with a few icons showing different things. He clicked on the filter button in the top right corner and turned off every filter except missile silos. He then selected Rome in the menu that appeared below, and all icons except from missiles that could hit Rome disappeared. "So," Marcus announced, keeping everyone's attention, "this is every missile that could hit Rome. Beijing is over here, so the nearest one is around 300 km away. "He pointed to it on the screen. "That's fine, then. It would take them years to get that far, and even longer to get the emergency launch code. The Imperial Army would stop them by then, and if they don't, we'll have plenty of time to evacuate," Antonius shared.

"*Bene, sic,* but the rebels wouldn't capture it in that sort of straightforward pattern," Livia argued. "They would probably reveal their message and try to gain supporters there. They would then either plant a spy there, to learn the code and launch the missile, or storm the place with all their supporters, force the people to give them the code and then fire it. They would probably only do the former if they lacked supporters. In total, that would take 6 months compared to your 11 years."

Antonius was left dumbfounded and couldn't find any way to undermine her argument. Instead, he turned away from her. "That's bad. If it only takes 6 months..." he trailed off. "We, and I mean the *Imperium*, won't let that happen. I doubt that the senate, the *exercitus*, and Caesar, would let the rebels become more powerful. Most likely, they wouldn't show any clip where the rebels try to gain followers, they would forbid individual news stations from broadcasting it, and if anyone tries to put it on the *penitus*, they would at once take down the message, be it a video, audio clip, or post, and ban the user. I'd bet they'd even find the person who did it and arrest them, if possible," Marcus assured Antonius. "It seems like some pretty extreme measures," Mater proclaimed.

"It is," agreed Marcus. "This is people trying to undermine the senate. The other senators, and me, would lose all their wealth and power if this rebellion isn't overcome, and I don't believe Caesar would be too happy losing his senate. After all, if they want to destroy the senate, they surely realise who is at its

roots. The senators might make some bad decisions, but Caesar is the one who lets those decisions go through. It must be him they need to eradicate to get rid of the problems.” “*Ita, et minime,*” Livia interjected. “If they had a different senate, then there might not be as many bad ideas for Caesar to let through. If you replace the senate, then Caesar will only have promising ideas to give. He may come up with bad ideas of his own, so you may have to kill him later, but it is more likely for only the senate to need to be replaced.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. If there’s no senate to generate bad ideas, there will be no bad ideas. Still, the rebels would probably kill Caesar anyway. Either they won’t realise that it is the senate making the bad ideas, although I bet that they will have argued that point with each other, they’ll kill him just to be safer they’ll kill him simply because they don’t like Caesar,” Marcus agreed.

“Well, it’s not just Caesar they hate. Other decisions that don’t go by him and the senate will be made by the rest of the *Imperium*. Therefore, they would need to dismantle the entire government, which is around 2500 people? I don’t think the rebels have that many people capable of holding a governmental position. Sure, they may have the ideas, but they probably don’t have people who can talk ideas up to the public, or be able to organise events, or co-operate with that many people. They might not be able to manage the money needed to fund all their ideas. If you tax the people past their breaking point, you’ve got another rebellion on your hands,” Antonius argued.

"Sorry to interrupt your feisty debate," Albus apologised, "but I have come bearing your dessert."

He had made a lovely meringue, with lots of different berries, like strawberries and blueberries on top. There were also little mint leaves. Not only that, but he had also made one each for the four of them. He put these down on the edge of the table, and picked up all the dishes and put them on the counter to be washed before he gave them each their plate.

"Dessert is served," he proclaimed, then he walked off to wash the dishes.

"It looks lovely!" Livia announced, and then she started eating. "You should make a cookbook, Albus, filled with all of your recipes. Even then no-one will be able to cook as well as you," Antonius called.

"You flatter me, dominus Antonius, but I honestly am not that good a chef. Many other people who have written cookbooks are better than me, and I fear the sales would not live up to your expectations," Albus replied.

"Don't be humble! You may claim you are not a good chef, but my taste buds beg to differ. You are a mighty fine chef, and the whole world should know it. If they wouldn't buy your book, I say that they obviously do not have as a refined sense of taste as others and do not know what they are missing out on." "Unfortunately, *dominus*, by that ruling, most of *Latroma* do not have a refined sense of taste."

"Yes, but they are lambs to the slaughter. Someone who does, like a food critic, will tell the populace that the food is good, and if they see or hear that from someone renowned, they will

automatically believe it and buy the book. People don't realise how easily they are swayed by public opinion. And the people that do realise that harden themselves against it and use it as leverage to climb to fame. Take Flavia Vesuvia Paula, the actress. In 2792, she did a movie which got a mild number of views and made a bit of money. Using that small glimpse of fame, she said something that agreed with general consensus, and suddenly the movie is a bestseller. She makes more money, gets more acting contracts, and she has been riding high for the past 11 years! Now, she is so recognised that people will always agree with her opinion. She is secured in fame forever. It only proves the crucial point; to persuade a city, you must only persuade one person," Antonius explained. "Even then, do they have to be of fame or power? If that person has lots of contacts, then can't they persuade the city?" Marcus questioned." A person is almost guaranteed to share their opinions with their friends. They will then either accept the opinion and share it or refuse it. However, it doesn't matter if they refuse. They may introduce the person to another friend of theirs, allowing the opinion to spread further. People also make friends autonomously. Just a quick conversation with a person you bump into can help spread it further." "Only a spark is needed to light a fire. That can then spread the fire, until a forest is burning, from one person lighting a match. Not every ember lights a fire, though. Some embers float into the distance until they burn out. But some hit a leaf on a large tree, which falls and ignites all the others. Same with opin-

ion. The spark is the original idea, the embers people spreading their ideas, and the large tree an influential person," Livia continued.

"It was the same with the AI craze of the 2780's. In 2784, the CEO of one of the biggest companies was convinced that AI could solve all of our problems, and he set his company to work designing the perfect AI system. Before long, he had convinced the public that that was what they wanted through cleverly worded speeches. The other companies were pressured by the bull market, and when it went sour, they had lost a lot of money, which would have been the same whether they joined the market or not," Mater agreed.

"I remember that. I was in the sixth year at primary, and everybody but me and Antonius had an AI able to manage their house via voice command. And as we didn't have one, we were picked on by the others. Because of this, I really wanted to have one, not because I liked it, but because I wanted to fit in. You wouldn't let me have one, *Mater*, and when the craze stopped in 2791, I was grateful. Many companies lost lots of money when the market finally slowed down like it should've." Marcus recalled.

By now, Albus had finished doing the dishes, and had come to sit with them around the table.

"The annoying thing is," he said, "is that the technology is now perfect. Back in the 2780's, companies were too focused on getting products out in time, that they didn't pay attention to fatal flaws, like delivering promised features, like easy app integration, or training the voice model correctly. But when

the market soured, they couldn't fire everyone in the AI department without slipping from power, so they kept them developing the product, but making less of a deal about it than during the craze. This meant that they had more time to deliver. But now that the technology is impeccable, no-one needs to develop it, which means that they can't stir a craze. That means that nobody is buying a product which is finally capable of doing what they wanted twenty years ago. People will only go for a product that is still developing, unless it can secure its place because it exactly what is wanted. Like in 2760, when the first touchscreen mobile phone was revealed. It allowed people to do so much, so it has been a good-selling product for 43 years."

"It is almost too stable a market," Livia added." People who are ill-equipped to run a business often see it as a wonderful opportunity to make money. The trouble is, the other companies are supplying phones to everyone, and so there isn't any space in the market for newcomers. Unless you can find or create a new niche, which is almost impossible, considering most things are already covered, you can't make any money from it.Your best bet is to cover up the hole when one of the bigger companies falls, but other companies will be vying against you for the privilege, and as a start-up, you probably won't have the vast resources that the company had to be able to follow in their foot-steps." Antonius looked at his watch.

*"Vide tempore!"*It's already 9 o'clock!" he exclaimed." We'd best get going, rather than be caught by criminals this late. We

need a good night's rest, mater *et pater* are coming tomorrow for Saturnalia. We must be at the train station for them by 6:00. It will be freezing. Sorry to break up the party this early." "Don't worry about it, Antonius. I completely understand. I'd best be getting to bed now too. I was planning to watch the games tomorrow, and you know that you have to be prepared. Speaking of Albus, would you like to come with me?" Marcus asked.

"*Utique domine.*" he replied.

He walked them to the atrium, where they put their coats and shoes on.

"I'll come by on Tuesday, after the emergency meeting, to tell you about it," Marcus told Antonius, holding the door open for him.

"I shall endeavour to remember it. What on earth would they be calling an emergency meeting for?"

Antonius pulled his sleeve on and walked out the door and to his car, with Livia trailing him. Their car was almost the ghost of Marcus's, but it was in fact the cheaper version, stripped of a few features. It had two less seats, 50 litres less of fuel capacity, and the key distinguishing factor was that it was metallic grey.

"*Vale,* Marcus," he called.

"*Vale,* Antonius," Marcus called back.

Antonius closed his car door, and Livia closed hers. They both did their seatbelts, and then drove out of Marcus's yard and into the street. Marcus watched them leave, and then turned

back facing into the house, closing the door behind him quietly. When he got back into the living room, a few *servii* were riding up from dinner, and *mater* and Albus were sitting on the sofa talking. The TV was on art mode and displaying a rather stylish piece of red and white moving about the screen. "So, what are you talking about?" he asked. "Nothing much. We're talking about an ad for a boat in a magazine that we saw. It looked very nice," Mater explained.

"How much was it?"

"23 *aureus*."

"I think we can afford it. I might investigate it. Well, I'm going to go to bed now. All that food has made me tired." He headed up the stairs and into his bedroom. The walls were painted blue, and a large 50-inch screen was on the wall in front of his desk. It doubled up as a computer monitor. Various documents and pieces of paper were strewn across the desk and the floor around it, surrounding the beige swivel chair. He had a square mat in the centre of the room, with various lines of assorted colours on it as part of the design. His bed was in the far corner and had a variety of blankets and pillows on it. On the farthest wall was a wardrobe that held all his clothes and a door that connected his room to its ensuite bathroom, complete with a combination bath and shower. Marcus only used this during the night, or when he did not want to be disturbed. He put on his pyjamas, which were grey, so that they didn't get dirty easily, and he climbed into his bed, and he put the Music Channel on the TV to go to sleep to and settled down into bed. Due to integrated

speakers, it felt as though he was engulfed by it, and it swept him away to sleep.

Chapter 3

The pattern of Marcus's dreams followed the patterns of the music. Luckily for him, most of the pieces that were played were light-hearted. During one piece, Marcus dreamt that he lifted off the ground and started flying. He woke up to the sound of the alarm buzzing, which added an annoying bumblebee to his dream before he woke up. It was 7:45 when he finally woke up, and without opening his eyes, he reached for the alarm and stopped it.

He picked his phone up and pulled a dark blue dressing gown on. He rubbed his eyes, and went downstairs, where Albus and some other *servii* were sitting.

"Morning, sir. We were just playing pinochle. Do you want me to deal you in?" Albus asked. "No, I'm fine. I would like to join in your conversation, though. What are you talking about?" "We were just sharing our suspicions that Marcus is cheating."

"Is that so?" Marcus sat down on the sofa. "Well, you've got twice as many cards as everyone else. When you take into account that nobody has close to a full set, and there is one card in the draw pile, you must have at least one, maybe two full sets."

"I have not got any full sets, and I would like you to prove to me that I do." Marcus claimed.

"I bet you one *sestertius* that you have both the hearts and the spades."

"Damn. Keep your money. I would like knowledge though.
How did you figure it out?"

"I noticed that neither of them had either a heart or a spade,
and between them they had the entire set of diamonds, and all
but the ten of clubs. Which must mean that the unturned card
is the ten of clubs, and you have both the hearts and the
spades."

"You know what?" Marcus asked. "Arthur Conan Doyle was a
time traveller, because when he wrote Sherlock Holmes, he
based it off of you."

"To do that, he must have been good friends with H.G Wells,"
Albus joked.

They all chuckled.

"I'm famished!" Marcus complained. "Have you had breakfast
yet?"

"*Minime, dominus.* We were waiting for you," Marcus replied.

"Okay. Have you prepared anything, or come up with any
ideas?"

"I was thinking buttermilk pancakes with maple syrup, but-
ter and edible flower petals," Albus suggested. "A marvel-
lous idea. Are you ready for the games today, Albus?"

"Almost, *dominus.* I would like to know when we are leaving,
so I can finish preparing?"

"I thought 9:00. The games don't start until midday, which
gives us ample time to explore."

"Good. I'll get started on the pancakes now. It will be about
half an hour." Albus walked over to the kitchen and poured
some batter into the pan.

"Well, me and Aquila had better be getting back to the *servii* room to get ready," Marcus made to leave.

"As long as you are down in half an hour for breakfast."

"What? What about the other *servii*?"

"I'll make them something nice. Hot porridge, maybe? Can you ask?"

"Of course. It's a kind gesture. Well, we'll leave you alone."

Marcus picked up the remote and turned on the TV. The news came on, with a presenter announcing the latest news on the conflict. Various battle scenes scrolled on the screens: lines of people being taken out by hidden mines, tanks being marched into battles and taking people down, conflict in the air with planes being shot down everywhere and mass explosions, and an entire building crumbling with people running out and police cars surrounding the site. Finally, the presenter started talking. She was obviously new to the job, as she started directly at the screen with the text on, and when she did look at the camera, it was not as if she was looking at the TV audience, but the cameraman behind. It gave the effect that she was looking through the camera and into their houses. "Breaking news. Reports have come in that rebels have overtaken an air base in the vicinity of Beijing and have partaken in a vicious battle in the skies near Langfang. The Imperial Army shot down 15 of their planes, but refused to resort to attacks in the skies, preferring to use anti-aircraft guns instead. The rebels have advanced on the Army base, taking down 100 men in their attack. They also planted mines in a tall apartment skyscraper in the centre of Beijing and they detonated them at

3:00 am Chinese time (20:00 Roman time). 50 civilians escaped, but 300 civilians, and 150 people working in emergency services were killed. A mass funeral will be held during Saturnalia, to commemorate their lives." Marcus turned the news broadcast off just as Marcus and Aquila came back down stairs.

"How long until breakfast, Albus?" Aquila asked.

"About 25 minutes left," Albus replied.

"That's a long time!" Marcus complained.

"Have you heard the news today?" Marcus tried to make conversation.

"Oh, yes. One of the other *servii* always puts it on at 7:30. I have no idea who it is, but I saw it when I went upstairs. I am honestly amazed that the rebels are able to capture aeroplanes. Now that they have those, I wouldn't be surprised if they start frequent bombing attacks over Beijing," Aquila answered.

"At least they're still Imperial planes." Albus said as he fetched the maple syrup from the cupboard. "They are still trackable on army Radar. All army planes are trackable for reasons like this. If a plane has been hijacked, or starts behaving erratically, they'll know and they'll stop it from being a danger to the public."

Marcus continued, "If they are able to capture the plane factory, they can make custom planes that are on a different frequency for them to track. They wouldn't use the army frequency, which is rumoured to be 2.5 gigahertz. It would be much simpler to use 1 gigahertz. It would just appear as weird blips on some dishes."

"Speaking of dishes," Albus was walking towards them with glasses filled with various drinks," I have some drinks for you. I have an apple juice for Marcus, an orange juice for Aquila and some Coke for Marcus." As he named each of their drinks, he placed it on the table in front of them.

"What are you having, Albus?" Marcus asked.

"I'm having some water."

"It is a day of rest! We are approaching Saturnalia, a time of celebration! Be lax and indulge yourself!"

"I'll be fine. I'm not taking an interest in anything else. Besides, it is so warm for winter, I need something refreshing. Oh, and by the way, breakfast will be ready momentarily." Albus was already back at the fridge, filling his glass with water from the dispenser there. He placed it on the counter and resumed cooking.

"So, shall we look at the programme, so you know what is coming up today?" Aquila asked.

"And you," Marcus said.

"What?" Aquila was blown away by that statement.

"Of course. We're having such a good time here, why not carry it through. It is heard of, is it not, that people take their *servii* to the coliseum?"

"Thank you very much. As proven by his earlier statement, Aquila and I greatly appreciate this gesture." gnus made a small bow of his head.

"It is no worries at all," Marcus said, turning.

Albus was walking over to them, with four plates of delicious pancakes on them.

"Your breakfast," Albus announced, sitting down, with his glass of water in hand. The breakfast was truly a masterpiece, with a massive stack of three pancakes in the centre of the plate, with melted butter on the top, and maple syrup leaking down, making a sea of syrup in the rest of the plate. Edible flower petals lined the pancakes, and honeycomb chunks circled the rim of the plate. Luckily, it had raised sides, so syrup didn't spill all over the table and floor. "It looks delicious, Albus," Aquila said.

"Well, I'll be insulted if you don't eat it."

"I'll try my best, but there's a lot of it. Sorry if I don't eat it all." "We may be able to pack some for lunch. Pancakes, bacon and maple syrup sound good?" Marcus asked. "Sounds tasty. I'll pack other snacks as well." Albus answered. "Well, don't be shy. The food won't bite you." Marcus picked up his knife and fork and took a bite of his food. As so often with Albus' cooking, he became blissfully unaware of anything else but his food.

"How do you do it, Albus? Your food is good enough to stop any harm in the universe!" he exclaimed.

"It is not, *dominus*. I doubt it is worthy for any other than the poor or *servii*. It is certainly not worthy for yourself, and yet you keep me as your chef."

"Albus, you are too humble. We all know that you can prepare food in a way no-one else can. When you die, the future of food will die with you. You are worthy of being the chef to Caesar himself." Marcus shot him down, so Albus couldn't belittle himself again. They all ate in silence for a few minutes,

savouring the delicious sweetness of their pancakes. "I wonder what *mater* is up to. I'll go check on her in a bit. I'll wait for you to finish eating." Marcus told them. "No, *dominus*." Albus refused. "Go, by all means. You are done, and we shan't be much longer. When we finish, we'll start getting ready for the games. By the way, how were you planning to get there? Car or train?"

"I was thinking car. I don't want to have to deal with rush hour. The traffic will be less on the ring road." As he said this, he started making his way to *mater*.

"*Scilicet, dominus.* I can't ever be bothered pushing through crowds."

Marcus disappeared out of their view into the art gallery hall upstairs. He sighed. He'd always liked being able to see all of Parkside. It looked especially nice at sunrise or sunset, when people started waking up, and the asleep buildings appeared to glow.

He turned to *mater's* room. The wall was painted plain white, like everything else upstairs, and the oak door was painted a nice shade of brown, called russet. He knocked twice before entering. If *mater* was still dreaming, he didn't want to disturb her.

"Come in," she said quietly.

Marcus carefully opened the door, with a slight creak. He'd have to remember to get a *servus* to oil it sometime. Mater put her knitting needles and wool down in front of her on the white sheets of the bed and looked up. The walls were white, and a queen size bed, which *mater* was sitting on, was in the

centre. A wardrobe was on the side nearest the door, and a wooden desk was on the furthest side, easily reachable from the bed. Various books and magazines about knitting were strewn across its surface - along with a navy blue vase holding red roses, and a cup of water that *mater* was drinking, and in the drawers beneath, some of which were open, were different colours of wool, and different kinds of needles. A lot of her creations were often seen somewhere on her carpet. A massive TV was on the right wall from the door, so that *mater* could easily watch it from her bed, and she often had the Teleshopping channel on, which Marcus thought absurd. Why, he questioned, would people want to watch different salespeople from different companies trying to sell you stuff all day. He'd never said this to *mater*; though. "I was just working on my latest knitting project, that door stopper mouse I showed you. I'm going to say it's a dormouse. Do you like it so far?" She pointed to it in front of her. From Marcus's point of view, it looked like a pile of white wool with some needles thrown in. He wasn't a knitting connoisseur like *mater* was though.

"I think it looks brilliant," he lied. "Where are you going to use it as a doorstop?"

"I was going to do the front door, but I think it might be too heavy. Maybe my door, just to see if it works. If it does, I'll make some more."

"A novel idea, *mater*. I hope that you do better than Livia, so as to even the scales. You have to admit, that teddy bear was pretty amazing."

"I know! I believe Antonius helped with the robotics side of it."

"Not to fret. If you and Livia worked together, you could make 50 *denarii* per hour each by selling your projects. "Oh, I am not that good. Besides, I could never bring myself to sell my little beauties. So, are you ready for the games?" "*Minime*. I'm not even dressed!" Marcus signalled to show the dressing gown he was wearing. "But I think Albus, Marcus and Aquila will have started packing by now." "You're taking Marcus and Aquila?" "Why ever not? We were having a fun conversation downstairs, so I invited them. And if I need *servii* to do something for me, though I can't imagine what, for the life of me, they will be there."

"Fair enough. Well, I won't keep you. You'd best be getting ready for the games. You don't want to keep the others waiting."

"You're right, I don't. *Vale*." Marcus walked off, closing the door behind him.

"*Vale!*" *Mater* called. Marcus made his way to his bedroom and had a shower and got dressed. As he was going to the games, he needed to look his best, so as not to be jeered by the other senators or the public. He put on his white toga from yesterday, and his lovely brown belt. His saddles were downstairs. He was not going to make the same mistake twice of wearing boots on a hot day. His hair was combed back and gelled, in a style that was fashionable for men of his stature. He had never been much for fashion, but he had to keep up his

reputation. He had a quick look in the mirror, and, after deciding he looked alright started to pack his bag. He put in his phone, a water bottle, A Short Story of the Roman Emperors and Their Acts: Part IX - he had finished Part VII earlier, and a camera. Usually he'd use his phone, but to get a good enough zoom level to see the action clearly, he needed a camera. Luckily, both his phone and camera were at over 95% battery, so they weren't likely to run out, but Marcus put his portable charger in just in case. He slung his bag onto his back and headed downstairs where the others were waiting in the living room.

"Ah, Marcus. You look splendid!" Marcus exclaimed. "Well, I have to look my best for the games. If I don't, I won't be able to be seen in public without being drenched in tomatoes." "I know what you mean. It isn't a burden on a *servus*, *per se*, but if we were to not look our best... Well, the impression it would give on you would be the same as if you were the one that did it."

"*Ita. So, Albus,* have you packed lunch yet?" "I have indeed. For your culinary delights, you will have cranberry and ham baguettes, strawberries and cream, a melon, some brie, some camembert and some crackers, and whatever we may pick up along the way."

"Well, I hear they serve alcohol at the Amphitheatre, so if I disappear and don't come back, you know where I am." Marcus joked.

Marcus chuckled. "Not if I don't give you money." In that case, you may not be able to find your wallet."

Aquila clapped his hands together.

"So! Shall we get in the car or are we just going to talk about going to the Saturnalia Games?" Aquila asked sarcastically. Albus checked his watch. "It's 8:23 now, and we want to be there by 9:00, so probably."

They all walked to the *atrium* and put their shoes on in silence. Being sensible, they all put on sandals. As soon as Marcus unlocked the car, Marcus called out, "I call shotgun!"

"Damn," Aquila mumbled under his breath. Marcus got in the driver's seat and did his seatbelt.

"Everybody ready?" he asked. Nods came from everyone. Marcus turned the car on and looked behind him to turn from the driveway. As he drove down the road, kids who were playing football in the street had to quickly pack up. "I don't understand why children play football in the road. It's dangerous if they don't notice a car coming, and there's a perfectly good park with proper pitches a short walk away." Aquila complained.

"Bullies most likely," Albus explained. "When they aren't in school, bullies inhabit the park so as to find easy prey. Either that, or they simply aren't allowed."

"Absurd! What kind of parent refuses their children the park?" Marcus protested.

Albus retained his calmness when he spoke. "Almost none of them. They may however refuse their children the park when they are not supervising."

"That is quite all right, but it is Saturnalia season! Everybody is off work! Why, and I'll be amused if you can tell me this, are they unable to go to the park now?" Aquila asked. "I genuinely don't have an answer to that," Albus mumbled. By now they were on the ring road, and halfway to their destination. "You are awfully quiet, Marcus," Marcus noted.

"*Ita, well,* I don't have much to say! Apparently, there's less traffic than we thought, so we should be in town by 8:45." "What are we going to do with our extra 15 minutes then?" Aquila asked.

"Explore the Flavian Amphitheatre? I haven't been there since 2803. I wonder what's changed. After all, the only reason we're going early is to escape the crowds," Marcus explained. "Ahi thought the games started at one in the afternoon though."

"They don't, Aquila. Most people go at one for the afternoon section, because they can't be bothered to get up for the morning section, which starts at nine o'clock."

"That's stupid. Why would being up at 7 o'clock be early? Most people wake up then anyway!"

"You also have to buy tickets to go to both sections. Often it's cheaper to buy just one."

"Okay. I understand now."

By now, the four of them were pulling off of the ring road to be in the right section of Rome.

"We're almost there!" Albus exclaimed, reinforcing what everybody else already knew, but he himself sounded genuinely surprised. "I can't wait!"

"Neither can the rest of us!" Marcus exclaimed, sarcastically.

"Ooh..." Marcus stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"What?" Marcus was worried about what he would say next.

"Where are we going to park? The Amphitheatre parking price is *2 as* an hour, which is outrageous, and I wouldn't trust the Central East Car Park. It may be free, but it is a hotspot for drunks, teenagers and criminals. If they saw my car in there...I can't imagine the vandalism that would occur."

"You could try the *Caesar Fons* Car Park. I've heard that it is hidden behind the park master's office, and only high-ranking people can park there. The bulk of it is underneath the park, and there is a complimentary car wash there. I reckon we'd get in," Albus suggested.

"What? How come I've never heard of it?" Marcus asked.

"They keep it a secret because if it got around by word of mouth that there was a car park just for high-ranking people, people would try to break in. You can probably imagine what would happen then." Albus answered.

"Ah." Marcus had vivid images in his mind of teenagers yelling at the guards, and spray painting graffiti on the walls.

"Still, I'm a senator. That's a high rank. How come Caesar hasn't told the senate?"

"He hasn't?" Albus was taken aback. "Maybe he announced it before you became a senator."

"No, he didn't. After I received the letter of senate acceptance, I started studying the minutes to prepare for my first meeting. There isn't any record of it anywhere."

"That's strange. Well, if it means more space for us, I'll take it." "I second that," Marcus chuckled.

Marcus turned the car around and drove towards the *Caesar Fons Imperial Park*. It was named this because it was owned by the Imperial government of all of *Latroma*, not the Roman region government. It didn't take too long, and, much to their surprise, there was a lot of people already in the park, comparable to the late afternoon crowds. Although it was crowded in the late afternoon, it wasn't usually crowded in the early morning, the only reason being because it was generally too cold in the morning for most people.

"How odd! There aren't usually this many people by the *Caesar Fons* in the morning," Aquila exclaimed. "Well, it is a warm winter. Maybe it will be too hot by noon."

Albus reasoned.

"Yes. The weather said it would be 35°C later." Marcus said as he turned the car around behind the park master's office.

"What do I do now, Albus?"

"Well, you see that security camera up there?" Marcus nodded. "You have to show it your licence plate and your senate card or your I.D."

Marcus followed Albus's instructions, and the floor in front of them gave way to a ramp, leading them underground.

Marcus climbed back into the car, and headed down the ramp, which closed behind them. There was a massive room underground with a few cars dotted around, which were being serviced. A bellhop strode over to them. "Salvete! You must be Marcus, the senator." he looked straight at Marcus.

"Yes, er, we were hoping for parking? My friend Albus here told me about it, and we plan to visit the Games today." "Ah, *ita*. Well, luckily, you're at the private *Caesar Fons* car park, exclusive to people senator level and above, and anyone they may be accompanied by. If you would like to follow me..." He strode in front of them, and Marcus followed him in the car.

"Right here, please." Marcus parked in the designated space which had a sign that read: 'Reserved for Marcus F. Gaius.' The bellhop called out instructions in Latin, and people came over, with a bucket of soapy water, some sponges and a hose, as though they were going to wash a car. Marcus guessed that it was his car they were going to wash.

"You're right, Marcus. They are going to wash your car, although they cannot do that with you inside. So, if you'd mind gathering your belongings, I shall escort you to the exit." Marcus undid his seatbelt and picked up his bag.

"Albus, would you mind carrying the picnic basket?"

"Not at all, dominus."

"Gratias tibi."

They all climbed out, and Albus opened the boot to get the picnic basket.

"Agh, it's heavy!" he groaned.

"Well, of course it's heavy! What did you expect? You're carrying 4 men's lunch in there!" Marcus retorted. "Four fat men with diabetes, that's for sure," Albus muttered under his breath.

Marcus locked the car, and it beeped to show it recognised the instruction.

"Follow me this way," the bellhop instructed.

They obliged, and the bellhop led them to a flight of stairs that went to the service.

"You'll find yourselves in the park when you follow these stairs. From there, it is a simple five minute walk to the Amphitheatre. I can fetch a map if you like," the bellhop suggested.

"No, no, it's fine," Marcus declined with a wave of his hand.

"We know the area well enough."

"All right. Well, I must go. Remember, the stairs take you to the park, and it's a five minute walk to the Amphitheatre. "The bellhop walked off, leaving them in solitude.

"You heard the bellhop, or are you all deaf? Up the stairs we go!" Marcus led the way, as the others followed.

They had to block their eyes from the harsh sunlight as they emerged from underground.

"That's bright!" Albus complained.

"I agree. Why is it this hot in December? We eradicated climate change in 2785!"

"A freak heatwave, I think. The demographics say average December temperature in 2801 was 15°C, and in 2802 it was 16.8°C. However, this year, it was 23°C, and in 2804, should be 13.2°C," Albus reasoned.

"Oh, yes, you can do everything with demographics. Go and bore a scholar with your figures. It is a remarkable feat, before

I met you, I didn't think it was possible," Marcus dismissed him.

"That's not particularly kind, Marcus," Marcus snapped. "I know you're usually sarcastic, but that is just mean. Don't do it again."

"*Ita, dominus,*" he replied.

"Now, apologise to Albus, and you'll be off the hook."

"I'm very sorry, Albus," Marcus apologised, with barely a hint of emotion or caring in his voice.

"I forgive you," Albus mumbled.

"*Bene.* Now, I think the fountain is that way, so let's head over there to find the gate." Marcus was pointing straight down the path ahead. Although they had seen a lot of people around the fountain, there was no-one else in sight. Marcus suspected that they purposefully tried to draw attention away from this area, so that people didn't see others come out of the car park. He suddenly realised that he had seen this path before, but because there was nothing to do or see down there, he hadn't bothered to walk down it. There appeared to be a lot of trees, but not much else. At one point, a squirrel ran out in front of them, carrying an acorn. It must have got it from the Botanical Gardens. It sat up for a second, watching them, and scurried away, up a tree on their right. They knew that they had reached the fountain when they heard overlapping conversations, and the sound of water trickling lightly. "*The Caesar Fons!* I don't think I have seen it since I was a young lad!" Aquila exclaimed in awe. "It's magnificent! I can imagine the builder got paid a handsome sum for this!" He circled around

it, running his hand around it, and inspecting every minute detail. There were minute pictures of the 12 Olympians, the Titans, and pictures of key moments in *Latroman* history: Romulus and Remus with Lupa, Romulus founding Rome, Caesar being assassinated, the great fire of Rome while Nero stood fiddling, the battle of 410 when the Goths marched on Rome, the Great War nearly 1500 years later, and much more. The engravings might as well have been a library of history, or a time machine. Rumours were that government scientists had invented a time machine 11 years ago, but they hadn't released to the public for fear of people misusing it and changing the course of history. "Come on, Aquila! We've got to get to the Saturnalia Games!" Marcus exclaimed. Aquila hurried after the rest of them. He called, "Wait for me!"

Chapter 4

It didn't take them long to get to the Games. It was a very short walk, just like the bellhop had said, with very little traffic on the road beside, allowing for easy conversation. Once they had settled into the senator's box, the other three went to buy drinks, leaving Marcus alone. Just as they left, another senator went into the next box. Unlike in other things, the Flavian Amphitheatre had the senators' boxes very close together because it was very old, and they didn't have enough space to build them further apart, and they weren't able to build too high upwards without sacrificing people's ability to see the arena. They did add personal screens as soon as they could, but the architects were shut down as soon as they suggested demolishing it and rebuilding it, and it was that move that led to the senate declaring it a historical site in 2761. It had been declared historical sites in 1372, 1788, 2150, 2319 and 2655, but within 50 years of each declaration, the definition for what was a historical site changed, and so the Amphitheatre fell into a state that was not technically a historical site, but you could be punished if you damaged it. In 2761, the senate declared that it shall forever be a historical site as of 1st of February 2762, due to the amount of important historical events that took place there. As such, when Marcus read the documents for the 2772 declaration, there were 4 lines about the Flavian Amphitheatre being a historical site even though it didn't fit the regulations.

Marcus looked over to see who was in the box on his right, and his jaw fell in horror when the figure turned to face him.

"Hello, Marcus. Didn't expect to see you here," drawled the familiar voice of Claudio.

Marcus hesitated for a moment before regaining his composure.

"Why? Did you not expect Caesar to let me off before the entire senate yesterday?"

"Minime, that I fully expected. I thought that my contact would've taken care of you by now. Although, I see what he is doing now. That's smart actually. Waiting till tomorrow..."

"Contact? What are you talking about? If you are trying to kill me and usurp my power, I swear I will report you to Caesar himself!"

"Ha, you forget. I have no need to usurp your power, for I have been a senator for all of your life. I built up my power over all this time, so why would I need be afraid of a young bud like you who thinks he is drinking nectar but is drinking sewage. You do not have any power and you know it. And reporting to Caesar will do no good. I have great influence, influence over Caesar himself. I am the emperor, the one who hides in the shadows, while my puppet is controlled by invisible strings."

"Are you saying that you can make Caesar make decisions that benefit you?"

"Exactly that. But I wouldn't dwell on it too much. You'll probably die tomorrow."

Marcus prepared to punch Claudio while he unsheathed his knife. Marcus struck a blow on his opponent's cheek, leaving a large bruise and a few scratches on Claudio's face. Claudio

threw his knife at Marcus, filling his shot with rage. Marcus ducked, and the knife became lodged in the wall behind. Out of weapons, and not wanting to hurt his hands, Claudius began to back away. Marcus prepared for another punch, when Albus burst through the door, carrying two beers.

"Marcus, I brought you a -"Albus' face fell in disbelief as he took in the scene in front of him. "What are you doing? I leave you alone for a few minutes, and you get in a fistfight?" he exclaimed.

"With the odd knife," Marcus muttered.

"It isn't as if you didn't ask for it," Claudius retorted. "Right, I'm not leaving you alone with him anymore. Where's your *servus* anyway, Claudius?"

"The bar. I believe he'll be switching between here and there, keeping the beers cold and keeping them coming."

"All right. But if you two fight anymore, I'll get you expelled from the Amphitheatre."

Albus sat down and handed Marcus his beer, fixing his eyes on the arena.

"Where have you been?" asked Albus when Marcus and Aquila came in.

"The toilet," Marcus replied coldly, with a hint of distaste.

"Because someone didn't mention they needed the toilet when we left."

He shot a look at Aquila.

"I thought we'd be late if I held you up!" explained Aquila, throwing his hands up as if he were surrendering. "Well, sit

down and be quiet. It's about to begin!" hissed Albus. A fanfare played over speakers everywhere, which seemed like a recording, even when it was *Latroman* law to not have it played live. The band retreated, and a spokesperson appeared on every screen.

"And now, an address from Caesar himself!"

The image of the announcer disappeared and was replaced by an image of Caesar in one of his thrones. He was in some sort of an extensive marble hall with a red carpet presumably stretching the entire length of the hall, from the doors to the throne. There was a war table in front of him, which briefly showed Caesar's plans for the rebellion before it turned off for the camera. The cameraman was clearly new to the job, as he had not prepared the scene, and he had got the angles and zoom wrong, so it looked like sloppy work. Banners on either side of Caesar unfurled, bearing the flag of *Latroma*, which was a scarlet background with a mighty eagle looking to the right, a symbol of dominance all over.

"Bonus dies omnibus spectantibus Ludos Saturnalia. I am Caesar, although you should know that. I am sure you have read the programme, so I needn't tell you what you have in store. I know you want to get straight to the action, so let the Saturnalia Games begin."

Deafening applause flooded the stadium as the announcer melted back on screen.

"A little speech from Caesar there. So, first up, it is time for a fight between five *myrmilli* and two lions."

Applause again, and the image of the spokesperson gave way to live arena coverage of the scared gladiators preparing themselves as the bars lifted, and the hungry lions ran out. They were terrified of the lions and froze for a second in fear, but quickly gained a fighting stance in order to be prepared. The lions, however, were rather placid, and stared at the audience as if awaiting food. It was only after a couple of beats of the whip that they noticed their fellow competitors in the arena. They turned to face the gladiators then threw their heads and roared; the noise reverberated around the arena, so it could easily be heard on the street outside. The *myrmilli* held their stance as the lions charged. Four of them were knocked over and the other executed a forwards flip and landed himself on the lion's back. It roared in outrage, trying to kick the *myrmillus* off, but the gladiator held on to its mane throughout. The rest of them were backed up against a wall, making short jabs at the other lion, while it made sweeps at them with its paw. One of them tried to copy the other *myrmillus* and flipped, but the lion just tipped its head back and the gladiator fell in. The other gladiator rode in on his lion and offered all the others a seat. The lion didn't look pleased at this, but it didn't complain. The two lions circled each other, both roaring at separate intervals. Eventually, they both charged, leaving the four proud gladiators to be walked off into their rooms.

"Did you see that there folks?" asked the announcer, playing a replay of the *myrmillus* jumping on to the lion. "That's a very hard move, that is. Why, we certainly don't teach our gladiators to be lion whisperers. So, only one death then, poor *myrmillus*

no. 2. If any of you were voting for *Sal*, *hand* over your money now.

And I would advise you all to cross him off of your programmes now."

There were few voices while everybody scratched him from their lists, but everybody could hear pencils scratching on paper.

The announcer played some advertisements, while everybody had a chat. Marcus found himself involved in a particularly interesting one about gladiators.

"*Sal*, poor lad. He knew he wouldn't make it to the end of the Games. He hoped he could, because Caesar promised anyone who survived the two weeks freedom, and 25 *sestertii*. I think he at least wanted to do something heroic before he died. And even that backfired," Albus mourned.

"*Ita*. I knew *Sal*. He was a great friend," agreed Aquila. "You knew him? How? *Servii* and gladiators don't meet. Otherwise, you get a vicious *servus* who overthrows their master," questioned Marcus in confusion.

"No, but he was a *servus* once. Well, technically all gladiators are *servii*. But *Sal* was the *servus* of a very rich master. He was hired in 2756, and he was one of his master's best workers. But in 2802, his master went bankrupt, due to the collapse of his bank. He suddenly had 22 thousand *aurei* in debt, and just 15 *aurei* in cash. So, he went to the government and became a *servus* himself, sending his *servii* to the arena in hopes

of them carving out a living for themselves," Aquila answered. "Oh, yes, I remember seeing that in the news last year," Marcus put in.

It went like this for a while, watching the battles, making comments on the gladiators, or the outcome of the fight. By lunchtime it was sweltering hot, and Albus kept walking between the box and the water fountain to refill water bottles, which were draining quicker than he could walk. "I wish there was a water fountain in here. That way you guys could fill your own bottles," Albus complained.

"Well, it's lunch now. Let's see," Aquila opened the picnic basket, and held out an orange juice carton. "Two litres of orange juice, anyone. Albus?"

"I get a five minute break. So what?"

"Not five, all of lunch. We have to conserve the juice."

"Not a sentence often said," Marcus chuckled.

"That's certainly true," Marcus agreed.

They divided the rest of the food, of which there was a lot, and began to tuck in. Marcus cut a slice of brie and put it in his baguette. He had learnt that this improves the taste of the meal and had been doing it since he was a child. He also took a strawberry, and dipped it in cream. Aquila, meanwhile, smothered his in cream.

"Aquila, do you really need that much cream?" asked Marcus.

"At that rate, you must be 97% cream, not water!" joked Albus.

To both, Aquila replied, "Mmhf!"

They thoroughly enjoyed their lunch, especially laughing at Claudio shouting at his slave, who wasn't obeying the specific wording of the instructions he was given. The fanfare played again, and silence fell over the whole arena. "Now," said the announcer, "we will have..."

The picture disappeared and became that of a hooded figure staring straight at the camera. Due to the lighting, you couldn't see their face, which made it more mysterious.

"A message to all viewers. You may know by now that there is rebel action in Beijing." The figure spoke in a monotonous voice, as if it had been edited, but the hints of the real voice underneath were in perfect Latin, with no accent, which puzzled Marcus, as he was expecting something else." But that is not the full story. The *Imperium* is deceiving you. If only you knew the full story, you would think the same. But we are here also. In Rome. We are far much stronger than you think. We have supporters everywhere."

The screen cut to black. There was a deafening silence whilst everybody tried to work out what had just happened. Suddenly, the silence was interrupted as gunfire rained down.

Amidst the screams, there was also yelling. Marcus looked over the edge of the box and saw people clad in armour flooding into the arena. Most of them had guns, but few had highly explosive bombs. They fired bullets at random groups of spectators, spreading chaos. All around, blood was spraying, and people were fleeing in terror. "Marcus! Look out!" someone yelled, but he couldn't be sure who. He thought it was Albus. A bomb flew straight past his box and hit the one on his left. It

careened forwards, and set shockwaves, knocking Marcus off his feet. Some people crawled out of the rubble, but were handcuffed, and taken away. Marcus saw two women, two men and a child forced inside by the guards, who had guns pressed to their heads.

"What's happening?" Marcus cried out of fear.

"Some sort of rebel action! I think their plan is to devastate the Amphitheatre!" yelled Marcus over the explosions.

Claudius chuckled.

"It's salvation, Marcus! Now, the rebels' ideas of a new world order are dim-witted. But when I rule *Latroma*, it will be a glorious world. And I will start with wiping people like you off the face of the planet."

Marcus had no time to reply, because he had to duck as bullets whizzed over his head and hit the wall behind, which had taken considerable damage. The next volley of bullets was sent out, causing panic in even more people. Still more gunmen flowed in, except these were different. They had more armour, and even more powerful guns. People with electric shields entered and surrounded the heavy gunmen. At last, the flow of people stopped, along with the rain of bullets. Silence. The rest of the people made no noise, apart from their breath and heartbeats, as if the slightest noise would provoke the rebels.

The hooded figure came out, but it didn't seem as if he was really there. Marcus still couldn't see his face, even as he looked up and around the entire arena, and he was muttering to himself in that same monotonous voice.

"So, you are the brave few, the few that don't flee. You survived the fire. You few, you smart few. The world would be better if you didn't flee, if you joined us." He looked around at everyone. Most people were shocked he was talking about them. "But you'd never do that, would you? No, never betray the proud country of *Latroma*. The lambs follow the shepherds. You don't realise that Caesar deceives you. Propaganda is as effective as ever. But we have that ability too. I am not asking you to join us yet, but only to betray your senate.

Where is *senatoris* Marcus Flavius Gaius?" He looked around the entire arena, before catching sight of Claudius.

"*Hic est! Senatoris* Marcus Flavius Gaius *adest!*" Claudius called and pointed at Marcus.

Gunfire started again, but it was concentrated at Marcus now.

"*Sinite!* So, you are the person who organised the defence against the Beijing section. You are smart, and it would be an honour to see you lead. Accept the offer, or you will be executed in Beijing on your visit," declared the hooded man.

"Visit?" Marcus muttered under his breath, then he collected himself and replied. "Never! I am a senator, and as such I am in debt to the citizens of *Latroma*. I must fulfil my duties to Caesar, Magni *imperatoris*, who leads glorious *Latroma*!"

"Are you sure? I mean, ruling does sound like fun..." Marcus suggested.

"Marcus!" Marcus hissed. "I don't usually beat my *servii*, but you are setting yourself up to be the first. I have made my decision, and that is final."

Marcus held his hands up.

"Alright,*Paenitet!*"

Marcus turned back to the figure.

"Resume fire," the hooded man walked out of the arena, and the gunfire resumed.

"Quickly! We have to get out of here!" Marcus yelled. Albus nodded. Hey darted out of the senator's box and headed down the corridor. They went down the first flight of stairs. A warrior was holding a grenade. He turned to face them. "You!" he said, pointing at Marcus. He was about to trigger it when he froze and fell face down. A security guard was standing in the doorway, holding a taser.

"We've got to get you out of here, *senatoris!* They are about to blow the place down!" he yelled.

Marcus could hear footsteps coming down the stairs. "He's down here. Soldier CXK13's last recorded position was close by!" he heard a voice call.

They sprinted further down, reaching the third floor. A bomb exploded in one of the shops nearby, knocking them all over. Albus clutched his ears.

"Ow!" he exclaimed.

"Come on!" the security guard insisted, pulling Albus up.

The group of gunmen caught up to them.

"There!" the leader pointed.

They began firing at them, and Marcus ducked to avoid getting hit. The security guard slid down the handrail, managing to avoid getting hit and tasering a few rebels along the way. For some reason, two of the soldiers stayed behind while the rest chased them. They were about to make it to the first floor,

when they heard a muffled explosion behind them, followed by the two soldiers that had stayed behind running down. The handrail slipped and sent the guard flying into the door, knocking him out.

"No!" Marcus yelled.

More rebels flooded in through the door, stepping over the guard as if he wasn't there. They kept running, dodging the bullets, sprinting down to the ground. They rushed outside and turned to face the Amphitheatre. People were still running out, followed by rebels. A hover plane lifted up from behind the arena, presumably carrying that hooded figure. Marcus decided he would never join the rebels. Not if they kill innocent civilians just to scare the *Imperium*. More people fell, and everyone knew they would never get back up. Passers-by stared in horror as they watched the scene unfold. They hadn't seen the whole thing though. They hadn't had to dodge gunfire, or see that horrible, hooded man. There wasn't anyone left in the arena, Marcus thought. He did a quick head count of the rebels. There must have been a thousand. He knew people who were annoyed at the *Imperium*, but none of them would ever take an action this drastic. How could there have been this many people, hiding underground, waiting to make their mark, without anyone knowing it?

And then the Amphitheatre exploded.

Chapter 5

Sirens wailed as ambulances, fire trucks and police cars pulled up. A nurse walked over to Marcus. She had flowing blonde hair and looked rather young and pretty.

"Are you alright, *senatoris*?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he replied.

A police officer came over.

"*Bona dies, senatoris.* We would just like to figure out exactly what happened at the arena. Can you please give your account of the event in question?" he asked.

"Leave him alone, *legatus*! Can't you see he's been through enough already?" the medic complained.

"Is he in need of medical care, miss?"

"No."

"Then you have done your duty. He is under my care now. I order you to leave now."

The nurse stormed off, annoyed at the officer.

Reluctantly, Marcus recounted what happened at the Amphitheatre. His voice caught when he had to talk about the security guard. He told it anyway. The police officer was taking notes all the way throughout.

"Okay. Thank you, *senatoris*. We will notify you with any news about the rebels. In fact, we arrested some of them and are taking them in for questioning."

Marcus saw some police officers walking behind some rebels, who had handcuffs. Several were already in various police vans. "I see that."

"Oh, and *senatoris*. I just have to ask this formally. Do you give me explicit permission to use your account in any press releases?"

"Yes, yes. Do whatever you need."

Marcus wasn't focused on the police officer though. He was more focused on the rebels. Why would people who wanted to make a new world order, where nobody would be killed, an Eden of sorts, kill innocent civilians just to scare people? He dismissed the thought.

Albus, Marcus and Aquila were still talking to different other officers, so Marcus just stood in shock looking at the Amphitheatre. It had once stood tall and proud, a display of *Latromani* power and riches. Now, part of the front wall still stood, but only to a quarter of its full height. The ticket booths and the gift shop, which had been renovated last in 2775 were also there. Other than that, there was a large area of rubble and sand. Some of the walls still partially stood, though none to their full height. From what he could see, Marcus guessed that the gladiator's area survived, but he couldn't be sure. Some shards of metal were scattered around, along with some guns and bullets.

"It's okay, *dominus*," came a voice. It was Albus.

"The rebels killed innocent people to scare us. If they want no more deaths, why do they kill people?"

"Why do we use wood to make eco-friendly materials? I don't know, Marcus, but think about it this way. If they hadn't interrupted, the afternoon gladiators would've found themselves slaughtered."

"Yes, but-

Marcus and Aquila came over, ending their conversation. "So, shall we go home?" Marcus asked. "I was thinking we could put the news broadcast on your phone as we drove." The walk back to the car park wasn't a fun one. Nobody felt up to talking, which annoyed Marcus, because he wanted a conversation to lift his spirits. When they opened the door into the car park the bellhop was standing there.

"Hello!" he exclaimed in a cheerful voice. "I am sorry to hear about the incident at the Games."

He weighed his words carefully, but with speed, so as to not offend them, but to sound casual.

"You've heard about that already?" Marcus ventured.

"Why, of course. To make your experience more comforting, I learn all the latest news ten minutes before it comes out. I see you got out unscathed?"

"Yes, we did. The police have detained most of the rebels that were involved in the attack."

"That's good to hear. It will be a while until your car is ready. Would you like me to take you to the waiting room?"

"Of course."

The bellhop led them down a short corridor into the waiting room. It had sofas against the wall, and a box with newspapers and magazines inside. There was also a water cooler in

the corner, with a stack of paper cups next to it. On the back wall was a TV displaying the *Capital nuntium* broadcast. "I'll leave you in peace now. I will come get you when your car is ready."

Marcus sat down and watched the news. He was vaguely aware of the others having a conversation in the background. It was the same lady that had covered the news on the war yesterday.

"Breaking news," she said. Her face was expressionless as she read out the script that was fed to her. Behind her, screens showed live coverage of various areas in the battle. "The rebels have captured the main road connecting Beijing and Langfang. All *militia* in the area have returned to the Beijing army base. Our army correspondent says that the general and honorary centurion are hoping to launch a full-scale attack on Langfang in a week. The rebels have also captured the commercial centre in Beijing, and the nearby cities of Zhuozhou and Gu'an. There has also been further developments in the rebels' attack on Russia. Rebel reinforcements have arrived in Pervomaiskii and have successfully captured an airstrip 1.6 kilometres away. Following several unsuccessful attempts to regain this lost territory, the general has decided to remove three quarters of his forces fearing an attack on the nearby city of Nerchinsk. Following a number of complaints, he has recorded this speech."

The reporter stepped aside as the screen changed to a video of a man standing on a plinth dressed in full army uniform. The

video cut to this recording in full screen. The man began to address the camera.

"Effective as of tomorrow, three quarters the army defending Pervomaiskii will be transferred to Nerchinsk,a nearby town that is under threat. I am confident that this is the right decision, and that one quarter will be enough to defend the villagers of Pervomaiskii.I am unfortunately able to deal with the threat of missile and air attacks from Beijing, but I am sure my colleagues will disable the rebels' air capabilities." It cut back to the reporter.

"In Beijing, the conflict is becoming more severe. Certain citizens trapped in their shops and apartments in rebel areas are being evacuated to a designated safe zone. People with spare room are being urged to allow these people into their homes. Let's talk to our correspondent, who is currently inside one of the refugee camps."

The bellhop opened the door.

"Sorry to disturb you. Great news, your car is ready. *Quaeso me sequere.*"

He walked around a corner and they followed. Marcus's car was sitting there, so clean it shined.

"We refilled your petrol, cleaned your car, vacuumed the inside, and also recalibrated your system. I hope you will use this car park again," the bellhop explained.

"Well, I certainly hope so too. You've done a brilliant job, right, Marcus?" Marcus chuckled.

"That's true. I wish all the other car parks provided this kind of service. That would be paradise."

They all got in the car. As they drove out, Marcus could feel that the car had thoroughly enjoyed its cleaning. Traffic was minimal when they got to the ring road, traffic was minimal. Marcus didn't know why, but he didn't mind. When they pulled up at home, mater was standing in the front door.

"Are you alright? I heard on the news. I couldn't bear to think what could've happened to you. Come in and tell me what happened."

They all sat down on the sofa, and told her the news, correcting each other and arguing as they went along.

When they had finished, mater sat in silence for a heartbeat. "That sounds dreadful," she summarised. "Was there really a hooded figure?"

"Yes," answered Aquila. "When I asked the police about him, they said they hadn't found anyone fitting my description."

"And he really wanted to kill you, Marcus?"

"Yes, for some reason. All I've done is sit back and give Caesar ideas. None of this is my fault," Marcus told her.

"No, it isn't. And Claudius wanted them to kill you. He tried to hand you over."

"He did. Which explains, at least in part, his hatred of Marcus over the years," confirmed Albus.

"Well, I can only hope Caesar punishes him tomorrow at the emergency meeting. What is that about anyway?" "I don't know. It wasn't mentioned on the calendar, and Caesar neglected to mention it yesterday."

"Alright. I'm going up to my room to do a bit more knitting. My door stopper mouse is nearly finished. Would you like to come and take a look?"

"Minime,satis est licet."

"Okay."

Mater walked up the stairs and into her room.

"I wonder what the *servii* are up to. Do you mind if we go talk to them?" Albus asked.

"Not at all. I think they were in the backyard, playing hoop toss or something."

They walked outside, leaving Marcus alone. He was about to pick up the book he was reading, when his phone rang.

"Salve?" he asked.

Salve,Marce.Antonius est."

"Antonius! Why are you calling?"

"Why on earth wouldn't I be? I'm your best friend, am I not allowed to check on you?"

"You are, but you came round yesterday! Could much have changed since then?"

"Of course it could have! What with all the bombs and guns and stuff earlier!"

Marcus finally realised why he was calling. He wanted to check if Marcus hurt or not.

"I'm absolutely fine. Luckily, I managed to dodge all the gun-fire just fine. Along with Claudio's knife," he muttered.

"Claudius's knife? What happened there? Are you sure you're alright?"

Marcus explained, for the third time, what happened in the arena.

Antonius fell silent for a moment.

"Well," he finally said, "that sounded extreme." "It was indeed. And, may I ask, how did you know that this happened?"

"It was all over the news! How could an event like that not be?"

"I never told you I was at the Games though."

"No, but you were on the news too."

Why else would the *legatus* want his account? He just wanted a story to give the press.

"So, this hooded figure. Do you reckon he may be the leader of the rebels?"

"No, from the looks of it the rebels are based in Beijing. I don't think they would be close to the *magistratus* or the praetorial guard. They'd prefer a space with small, dark alleys where they could easily hide."

"Fair point. But if they were based here, they would have easy access to the corrupt senators and police, and could take over *Latroma* easily."

"I reckon that their second most powerful base would be here. Why not? They could terrorise the *Imperium* by continuing fighting in China, and then attack here when Caesar is weak."

"I guess." Then Marcus heard Livia's muffled voice over the phone. "Look, Marcus, I've got to go, alright? Livia says I'm disrespecting *mater et pater*."

"Okay."

"Just stay safe, will you? I don't want you getting yourself hurt."

Antonius hung up.

Marcus finally picked up his book. As always, he found it very interesting. He read it for ages and wouldn't have stopped if *Mater* hadn't come down.

"Oh, Marcus! There you are! I've been looking high and low for you! And, yet, you haven't moved a bit. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine, mater."

"Good. Well, I have something to show you."

"Which is?"

"I finished my doorstop mouse! I've been knitting it all day! Look!"

From behind her back, she revealed a perfect white mouse, complete with ears and whiskers.

"Feel it, it's heavy!"

Marcus picked up the small, woollen mouse and was surprised that it was heavy.

"It is indeed! I reckon it would work very well as a doorstop."

"*Ita!* I'm going to try it out now! I think we'll definitely beat Antonius and Livia this time."

"Yes, we will."

"Ta-da! One new doorstop!"

"Brilliant! So, what are you going to do now?" "Oh, I was going to go back to a blanket I started making a long time ago."

It's got the most beautiful colour swirls. Would you like to see it?"

"No, I'd rather you surprise me with it when it's done."

"Suit yourself. Vale, *Marce!*"

"*Vale.*"

He picked his book back up and read some more. It was about 6:00 when Albus walked in.

"That was a long game of hoop toss, Albus."

"We didn't just do hoop toss. We walked to the shops, and I gave them each a bit of money to buy themselves a treat. I got some crisps. Would you like some?"

"Oh, you didn't have to do that. I'll refund you the money."

"No, it's alright."

"As the *dominus*, it is my duty."

"Okay. I was just coming in to start preparing for dinner. I'll call for the *coqui* in a little bit."

"What are we having tonight? I'm famished!"

"Sloppy Joes. It's an American dish. A plate of chips covered in meat, with a little dipping sauce."

"Great. I'll let you amaze me with dessert. What bit are you making?"

"I'm not going to tell you that. That way, you will make a less biased decision on which part is your favourite."

"Fair enough. Tell me afterwards."

"Nope!" He disappeared into the kitchen.

This left Marcus alone again. He decided he didn't want to read any more of his book, so he put on the Scenic Views channel, and immersed himself in the Amazon Rainforest. He

was only dimly aware of Albus calling the kitchen *servii* in to help prepare. Exotic parrots flew across the screen, their colourful wings spread. Water gushed down the waterfall, which was part of the river Amazon. Suddenly, the screen went blank.

"Hey! I was watching that!" he protested.

It was *mater*.

"It's time for *cena*, Marcus. Did you not know that?"

"Albus is done already?"

"Yes. It looks lovely. It's an American dish, I'm told." "I know. They love their burgers and meat in *Novi Eboraci*."

"They do indeed. Albus, we're ready!" she called.

Albus appeared, holding two large plates filled with food.

"Let me guess, you're still not going to tell me?"

"No. I hold in my silence."

Mater pointed her fork at each of them as she spoke.

"What's going on between you two?"

"Albus won't tell me what part of the dinner he cooked, so I can't compliment him."

"Does he need to? As long as you compliment the dish, you are still complimenting him."

"Told you so!"

"You're supposed to be on my side!" Marcus exclaimed. *Mater* and Albus laughed, while Marcus stared at them, annoyed.

He picked up his fork and took a bite.

"Mmm! This is delicious! You should cook this again!"

"Shall I tell you a secret?"

"What?"

"I didn't cook a single bit. It was all the work of the kitchen *servii*."

"Is that why you didn't want to tell me?" "Partly.

Now, I have to go and prepare dessert. Giant s'mores, another American classic."

"He seems to be making a lot of American dishes tonight."

Marcus noted.

"Maybe he's worried that our supply chain will get cut off by the rebels. You know that's a possibility."

"But why American food? Surely we're more likely to lose Asian food?"

"We are, but that's already hard to get. You can't get a decent chicken teriyaki or some sushi nowadays. At least we still have everything from America for now."

"Good point."

They are the rest of their dinner in silence, too busy eating to talk.

Albus walked in again, waiting to take away their plates.

"Did you like it?"

"It was amazing, Albus!" *mater* exclaimed.

"You should make it again sometime. It's one of America's finer meals."

"I shall make a note of it. Your giant s'mores will be here in a second. We have made an entire tray of it, but we'll freeze whatever you don't eat and put it in the fridge to eat later."

"Sounds like a filling dish," Marcus assumed.

"Take my word for it, it is."

Albus collected their plates and walked back to the kitchen, where a *coquus* was standing, waiting for him. "I'm glad you set Albus free. He's a lovely young man, and his heart's in the right place."

"He's a good friend, and chef. I hope he doesn't leave."

"We'll never find a chef as good as him if he did.Oh,Marcus?"

"I'm listening."

"Did Antonius call you earlier?"

"Yes, why?"

"I thought he might."

"Why did you think he might?"

"He's your friend! He wants to make sure that you're alright!"

Albus walked in with bowls, filled with their s'mores,that were nearly too big to fit.

"Your s'mores.We cooked it using the classic method, involving blocks of chocolate rather than using chocolate-coated biscuits."

"Thanks for putting in the extra effort," Marcus smiled. "No worries. It's what you pay me for. I'm going to go wash the dishes, if you don't mind."

He turned to go to the kitchen but was stopped by *Mater*.

"Oh, don't leave,Albus.It would be so nice to have the extra company."

"Hey! Am I not company enough?" exclaimed Marcus.

"No.You're just annoying."

"Hey! That's not fair!"

"I'll stay. Just between us, the kitchen is pretty boring. Honestly, who cares about which *servus*' master got his wife some new earrings recently? *Servus* gossip isn't interesting at all."

"I can imagine. I nearly always get bored before senate meetings listening to gossip. Bored *servii* will have even less to talk about."

"I'd say I knew what you meant, but I don't. I absolutely love gossip. It's always fun to find out what people are doing, and then complain and twist it into a new story to tell others."

"Yes, I guessed you'd say that. Tell me, what do you gossip about most?" asked Marcus.

"Oh, mainly knitting," replied *mater*.

Marcus rolled his eyes at Albus, who had to stifle a laugh.

"What? What's so funny?" she asked.

"Nothing," answered Albus.

"I don't believe you, but I won't press it."

"Mm, Albus, this is delicious. How did you make it taste so good?"

"Well, we hit the marshmallows until they go golden brown, and keep them warm until the chocolate has become liquid, and we then spread it on the biscuits, and then add the marshmallow."

"Even the Americans, the inventors of s'mores could learn from your cooking."

"Thank you. I'm really not that good."

"Yes, you are. Well, I'm stuffed. I'm going to turn in if you don't mind," announced Marcus.

“No, I don’t,” answered *mater*. “Albus is much better company.”

“Actually, I’d better go and help out the *servii* with the dishes. It isn’t fair to make them do all the work.” Albus responded. “Well, okay then. I’ll go and do some knitting. I have a lot to do.”

Marcus headed upstairs to his bedroom and got ready for bed. Before long, he was asleep.

Marcus woke up late the next morning. The stress of the previous day had worn him out, but he still had to go to the emergency senate meeting later. He already had his itinerary planned out: he was going to rest at home for a while, then he was going to head into Central Rome for a walk before heading to the *senatus*. From there, it depended on how the meeting went. Drearly, he went downstairs, and found one of the *servii* walking out of the kitchen.

“*Salve dominus*. We’re just preparing breakfast now. Would you like a coffee while you wait?” the *servus* asked.

“Yes, please. What are you making for breakfast today?”

“We’re making a full English breakfast. Albus thought you might like some warm food.”

“He’s right about that!” Marcus laughed.

“Your coffee, *dominus*.”

The *servus* handed Marcus his coffee and retreated into the kitchen. Marcus picked up the remote and turned the TV on.

“Further development on the uprisings in Beijing,” the news-reader started. “The *exercitus* have succeeded in gaining control of the skies above Beijing, one of the most sought-after territories, as it allows them to conduct unrivalled bombing raids on key rebel areas. However, they are going to focus on attacking Langfang on the ground for now, as they need to disable all anti-aircraft missiles, the head of the *exercitus* announced in a formal statement earlier today. Meanwhile, fear in Pervomaiskii has caused many to flee the area, seeking refuge in areas such as London, Paris and Rome. Here’s a statement from one of those such rebels:

‘We’re leaving Pervomaiskii because it is not safe. The *exercitus* isn’t doing enough to protect us. It is sad. We must leave behind our home, our family. Grandma is too old to come with us, so we must leave her. We are all very sad, but it is the best we can do.’

The *Imperium* is urging people across *Latroma* to open their homes to conflict refugees, offering a 500 *sestertii* reward for those who look after refugees. However, this reward is not available in areas near the conflict zones, or near where the refugees are coming from, sparking protests from people who live in those areas.”

Marcus turned off the TV as a *servus* delivered him some breakfast.

“*Gratias tibi valde*. It’s going to rain today. I reckon you should do your recreational activity inside today.”

The *servus* nodded and headed back to the kitchen. As part of the anti-slavery act of 2771, which aimed to keep working

wages to a minimum, while discouraging total control over *servii*, *servii* must be given no less than 45 minutes a day of recreational activity, and any *servus* has the right to complain about unsatisfactory activities, and not be punished. Marcus ate in silence for a while, until Albus burst, sleepy eyed, from the *servii*'s lodging.

“*Bonus dies*, Marcus. The *servii* have made breakfast already? I told them not to start washing up without me.”

Albus headed to the kitchen, but Marcus stopped him.

“I'd much rather you stayed here with me. Go get yourself some breakfast and be right back.”

“*Bene, dominus.*”

Albus trudged into the kitchen to fetch his meal. Marcus could hear indistinct voices in the room next door.

“Albus? Are you arguing with the *servii*? ”

Albus came out holding his food in hand.

“They'd done the washing up without me! I told them not to!”

“It doesn't matter, Albus. Anyway, the war in Beijing is getting worse.”

“What's happened now?”

“Well, the *exercitus* are in control of the skies, but people are fleeing Pervomaiskii. There is a 500 *sestertii* reward for people willing to take in refugees.”

“That seems like a good idea. Are you willing to do it, Marcus?”

“Oh, absolutely. Can you apply while I'm out?”

“Of course. Let's just hope they speak Latin.”

“Me too. Well, I’ve got to get ready to go to the senate meeting.”

Marcus put his plate down and headed upstairs to get dressed. When he was done, he headed out to the car. There were some *servii* playing pool in the garage. They waved hello.

“*Salve!*” Marcus called.

He got in the car and made his way onto the ring road. There was little traffic, which was unusual for most days, let alone a Tuesday. Suddenly, a raccoon appeared in the middle of the road. Marcus hit the brakes and swerved to avoid it. Luckily, he managed to swerve down the exit he needed, and he headed into Central Rome. He parked at the *Publica Bibliotheca* car park, right next to the senate building.

Marcus took a deep breath and headed into the senate building. The rest of the senators were already there, as well as some high-ranking officials from the *exercitus*.

The fanfare played once again, as Caesar rose on his pillar. “*Gloriosi Ceasaris!*” came the cry. Marcus joined in too, but he wasn’t particularly emphatic.

“Be seated,” called Caesar to the senate. “I have gathered you here today, because there is a pressing matter we need to discuss.”

“What might that be, Caesar?” one of the senators called. The others snickered.

“I am sure you know what it is, Atticus. One more joke like that, and I will probate you. I have gathered you here to discuss the matter of the war in Beijing.”

The entire senate fell silent. In just 2 weeks, the rebels had managed to capture an entire town, and send shockwaves across *Latroma*, inspiring would be rebels in Rome itself to spring into action.

“It has come to my attention that there has been rebel action here in Rome itself.” Caesar explained. “This is a step too far. As such, the *exercitus* and I have agreed that we must send senators to Beijing. I have prepared a list of senators that I would like to go on this mission. These are the senators who I believe will have the greatest diplomatic power with the rebels.”

Marcus knew it. Caesar was trying to get him killed. There were better diplomats out there. At least if he made the list he would be at the bottom, one of the weaker senators.

Caesar began to read.

“The senators going to Beijing shall be: Marcus Flavius Gaius.”

Marcus didn’t care for the rest of the names. Caesar had a list. People who would disappear at once, or slink into the shadows. And he had just jumped to the top.

After he had finished reading, Caesar proclaimed, “That’s all. No one shall ask me to go to Beijing or ask to switch with a fellow senator.”

Caesar and the other senators discussed other things that they should do, but Marcus didn’t pay any attention.

When the meeting was over, Marcus stormed out of his booth and into the atrium. A *servus* standing there tried to calm Marcus down.

“No! Leave me be!” Marcus yelled, shaking the *servus* off.

Mater was standing outside when he got home. Her face fell when she saw Marcus pull up.

“Oh, Marcus.” She tried to calm him down. “We all joked about Caesar doing something like this, but none of us thought that it would actually happen.”

Marcus fell into her arms and sobbed.

Chapter 6

The rest of that day and the next was a blur. Marcus didn't remember much of it. He was just dreading the eventual flight to Beijing. He woke up on the day and headed downstairs to a simple, but lovely breakfast Albus had single-handedly prepared for him. It was a lovely little omelette, and a glass of orange juice.

He sat down on the sofa and began to tuck into his meal. Albus could work magic with food. He could make even an unassuming omelette like this into the greatest thing you'd ever eaten. As soon as Marcus had swallowed his first mouthful, Albus came in and sat next to him.

"Are you ready for the flight, *dominus*? If you want, I can get one of the *servii* to pack your bags for you? I'm sad to see you go."

"Thank you, Albus. If you could do that, that would be great."

"No worries. Are you enjoying your breakfast?"

"Of course. Your food works wonders, Albus."

"If you say so, *dominus*."

Albus slowly rose, heading back into the kitchen, leaving Marcus alone.

After he'd finished his meal, he headed upstairs to get dressed. Once he was done, a *servus* entered, and went ahead to pack his bags. With nothing else to do, Marcus decided to look at mater's latest knitting project.

"*Bonum mane*, Marcus. Ready for the flight to

Beijing?”

“My bags are being packed as we speak.”

“Good. Albus and I thought we might go with you to the air pad. Would you like that?”

“Of course! Nothing would comfort me more. After all, it may be the last time I see you.”

“Don’t think like that, Marcus. You’ll just work yourself up over nothing.”

“I suppose. And even if he does kill me, it’s a big cash payout for you and Albus.”

“Weird how they think they can value a human life in *aureii* like that isn’t it? No amount of money can ever reconcile a life lost. Otherwise, I’d have killed you for the money when you were a baby.”

“Thanks for the words of thoughtfulness, *mater*.”

“Oh, it’s just another charming quality of mine that you’ll miss while you’re in Beijing. Speaking of, have they told you how long you’ll be staying?”

“Not officially yet, no. They’re handing out formal agendas today. They messaged me earlier saying it would be around 2-3 weeks.”

“Ah, such a long time for a person, yet so short in the grand scheme of things.”

“Very true. Are you ready to head out yet, *mater*? I suppose my bags are packed, and there’s no sense in arriving let when we could’ve arrived early if we chose.”

“I see some reason in that. Just give me a minute to get dressed and we can go.”

“Great!”

Marcus headed back into his bedroom, where the *servii* were wrapping up with the packing.

“Hello, *dominus*. We’re nearly finished packing. We have all the essentials, including a week’s worth of clothes, and a few books and card games. Will that do you? We can also prepare you a lunch for the flight.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I’m alright. I believe we’ll have catering on the flight.”

“*Bene, dominus*. Alright, here’s your suitcase. I hope you’ll have fun in Beijing.”

“Me too. Thanks for all your help.”

“It’s a pleasure of mine, *dominus*.”

Marcus headed downstairs, looking at his house for the last time before he left. Albus was outside, in the car waiting.

“Head on out, Marcus. I’ll be just a minute!” *mater* called, walking downstairs whilst putting an earring on.

He headed out to Albus.

“I’ll miss you, *dominus*. We all will,” he told Marcus.

“Thank you, Albus. I’ll miss you all too.”

Mater hopped into the back seat.

“Are we all ready to go?” she asked.

“Let’s go,” answered Marcus.

Albus started the engine, and they began to roll away.

As they slowly moved away from the house, Marcus noticed a gathering of people on the pavement up ahead. The *servii* were standing there, cheering him on his journey.

They all waved and smiled as he rolled by, smiling and waving at them.

“Thanks, guys!” Marcus called, rolling his window down.

“Have a good time in Beijing, *dominus!*” one of them called. Marcus chuckled, “I will do!”

He kept waving until they were out of sight, and then he sat back into his seat, and he put his window back up

“You better get comfortable. The *exercitus* launch pad is half an hour away for the citizens’ safety.”

“I know that. At one point, the senate was considering moving it even further away from Rome, but it was too close to other towns. The current location really is in the middle of nowhere.”

Nobody said much during the drive. Albus was concentrating on driving, *mater* was doing her knitting, and Marcus was checking the news. There wasn’t much news on the war in Beijing, apart from a press release from the head of the Beijing army forces welcoming the senators.

When he looked up from his phone, they had just about arrived. A very powerful electric fence surrounded the airfield, which looked like a field with cobbled roads, and a massive aircraft hangar in the centre. For safety, most of the building was underground, protected by very strong walls that are designed to take the explosions of C4 and TNT. Most army buildings were built in this way, but they unfortunately were very resource-intensive buildings.

Two guards wearing full army uniform greeted them at the gate. Due to recent advances in technology, they didn’t have

to constantly wear armour. Instead, they wore normal official army clothes, and then they could put on a helmet, which could expand into full body armour, that was mostly blue with the symbol of *Latroma* in gold on the chest, if need be.

Due to the seriousness of the transportation to Beijing, they were decked in the full armour.

“State your business,” one of them said in an almost monotonous voice.

“I am Albus, *servus* of the *senatoris* Marcus Flavius Gaius. I am transporting him here.”

“Do you have an identification card for the *senatoris*?” the other asked.

“Yes, sir.” Albus drew it from his pocket. “See here.”

One of the guards took it from Albus’ hand and took it to the booth nearby for verification.

“Wait here, please. We are just verifying your identification card and license plate.”

“Understood, sir,” Albus replied.

They sat in silence for a little while, before the other guard returned, holding the identification card, and another slip of paper.

“We have verified the identification card. May I see the *senatoris*?”

“Of course. He’s sitting in the back.”

Marcus wound his window down.

“Is there a problem, sir?”

“Not at all. We just want to quickly brief you on the airfield.

Obviously, you can use your identification card to open any doors, as I'm sure you know already.”

“I do.”

“But you should use this slip of paper when you have to enter any area that is guarded. This proves that you've been granted entry into the airfield. Otherwise, they will have to re-identify your card each time.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Give them clearance.”

The barrier in front of them began to rise, and Albus slowly drove the car onto the cobbled road. They had arrived. On a regular day, most of the hoverplanes would be in the hangar, with a few flying, or preparing to launch, and a few in the sky doing flying drills. Lots more planes were queued up to fly now, presumably sending reinforcements and supplies to the *exercitus* base in Beijing. Soldiers not wearing armour loaded cargo onto the crafts, and those that were prepared to board them. Some soldiers were doing their daily workouts on facilities spaced out from the launchpads, and Marcus knew there were unlucky ones who had to do it underground. It was a hive of activity. More guards lined the roads, directing them to the visitor parking. Albus kept driving slowly and carefully, taking care to avoid swerving off the path and hitting someone. Eventually, they made it, with a soldier entering the room as they arrived.

“Are you the party of *senatoris* Marcus Flavius Gaius?”

“Yes, we are,” Marcus answered.

“May I see your entrance slip?”

“Of course.”

Marcus handed it to them.

“Thank you,” replied the soldier. “I am to be your escort and roommate, here and in Beijing. My name is Bjørn or Biornus in your Latin tongue.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Bjørn. Is that how it’s said?”

He laughed a hearty laugh.

“Very good, *senatoris*. It is the Norwegian word for Bear. So, we must be heading to the launchpad. Don’t want to miss the flight now, do we?”

“Certainly not.”

“Good. Please follow me.”

Bjørn lead them down another path, across the open field.

“You’re lucky I arrived in the car park when I did, Marcus.

Otherwise, you’d have had to come find me. There’s no need for that paper slip anymore as well. As long as I’m with you, they can prove it’s us.”

“How?”

“The weird and wonderful ways of the *exercitus*. All soldiers have to have a chip implanted in their palm. The chips have unique ID’s that can’t be replicated, so they know it’s me. It also works as a tracking device.”

“Sounds painful. Did it hurt?”

“*Ja*. After you have the transplant, you cannot move that hand for *tre*, sorry, three days. And the army being the army, they won’t let a second be wasted, so they use it to do mental tests and psych evaluations.”

“So, they use suffering in pain as a time to test you.”

“Ja, that is what I said.”

“That’s a bit cruel, don’t you think?” mater chimed in.

“Yes, it is, *domina*. But you cannot be soft in the army. That’s why they do it. To see who the weakest link in the chain is.”

“Are we nearly there yet?” asked Albus. “My feet are killing me!”

“We are. You see that plane in the distance? That’s the one we’re headed to.”

“So not too much further.”

“No. Mind you have to walk back as well.”

“Oh!”

Marcus and Bjørn chuckled.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have come, Albus,” Marcus suggested.

“No, *dominus*. It is worth coming to see you go.”

“Thank you, Albus.”

Another soldier called out, “Biornicus! You and *senatoris* must hurry.

They sped up, running towards the plane. Marcus and Bjørn climbed up the landing ramp, passing the soldier on the way up.

“Lucky you made it. They didn’t want to delay the plane much longer. You need to get seated. If you get a window seat, you’re less likely to get nauseous.

“Duly noted,” replied Bjørn. They got settled in seats next to each other, though they weren’t like normal aeroplane seats. They were kind of cushioned benches, like the sort you might find in a conservatory.

The ramp folded in, forming a wall, and the engines began to whir. The plane started to lift off the ground, with a cloud of steam, and Marcus watched as mater and Albus shrank away. The captain's voice sounded on the tannoy.

"Hello, senators, soldiers. We have 6 and a half hours before we land in Beijing. Current Beijing time is 5:18 pm. I just want to inform you about the services we have aboard this jet. We have on-board catering on this flight. We will be able to feed you lunch at 13:00 Roman time, and optional snacks and refreshments will be available at 15:00. There are board games and a large TV that has a selection of 30 movies available. Any questions may be asked to the service staff."

This was your captain speaking, and we hope you have a pleasant flight."

"Buck up, Marcus. We've got a long flight ahead, and you'll be exhausted from jet lag when we get there."

"I'm sure I'll be fine. So, Bjørn, how come you're supporting *Latroma*? Surely you want to have a free culture?"

"There are many who want that, Marcus, but I do not. Indeed, I do wish the *Imperium* would not interfere with our culture, and enforce Roman ideology upon us, but the removal of the state would almost certainly create an anarchy. And who would fill the power vacuum in Rome except a Roman, who would be harsher to reinforce stability? No, I fight for *Latroma* not to support Roman culture, but to support stability. If we do not have that, then the world has nothing but debt."

“I see where you’re coming from. Though I believe in Roman culture, I don’t think it should be forced on others.”

“Others don’t see it that way. Others believe the government is forcing their culture on us and must be eradicated. Even my brother fights for the rebels in Svalbard. I wish he would see things my way.”

“That must be hard. Although I reckon the rebels are proud that the *Imperium* recognise this as a war, and not a simple protest.”

“True enough. They are particularly strong at home, such a remote place. We have units stationed there, but the government suppresses the news in fear of scaring everyone in Gaul and Italia.”

“I didn’t know about that.”

“Well, there is a separate division that deals with the army. Usually, they do things that don’t concern the senate, like welfare check-ups or exercise schedules. But every so often, something appears that is a senate matter, and so they present you with the problem.”

“I understand.”

Marcus read his book for a while, while Bjørn watched the plane’s progress on a small screen in their room. It seemed like they were the only ones on the plane, because the rest of the senators and their escorts were busy in other rooms.

A sudden chime from the tannoy made them both look up.

“Hello, this is your captain speaking. I just want to let you know that some *coqui* are coming around with lunch now.

We have prepared a simple lasagne for you today, and we have made sure that there are alternative meals available for people with allergies, which we have been made aware of. If you are one of those people, please go to the kitchen to collect your meal. For dessert, we have a lovely sticky toffee pudding with optional ice cream and custard. I hope you are having a pleasant flight.”

Another chime ended the address. Sure enough, a few minutes later, a man wheeling a trolley came into their room.

“*Bona dies senatoris* and Biornus. I don’t believe either of you have allergies?”

They told him they didn’t.

“Well, okay then. I have a beef lasagne for you, with some cucumber and carrots. I have some water as well.”

He poured water for both and handed them their plates and cups.

“I’ll come back in about ten minutes, when you are finished, and give you your dessert, if you aren’t already full.”

He left, pushing his trolley with him.

Bjørn wolfed his meal down, but Marcus ate his slowly.

“Do you not like it, Marcus?” Bjørn asked.

“No, I like it, I just miss Albus’ cooking. It’s not as good as that.”

“I understand. It has to be hard leaving them behind.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Well, chin up, because you’ll be back with them before you know it. And I’m not leaving your side until then.”

“Thank you Bjørn.”

“If I’m honest, this is the best thing I’ve eaten in a while. They don’t normally give us food like this, so that we’ll eat army rations whilst in the field.”

“That’s harsh. Do they not give you some as a treat every so often?”

“Generally, no. We get food like this at the award and retiring ceremony, which is only once a year.”

The cook came in again, presenting their desserts, and taking their dishes. They went back to what they were doing until snack time, when both went to get biscuits and tea. By then, they were about 4 hours away from Beijing. Marcus then went to watch a movie, whilst Bjørn practised dodging and rolling. Before they landed, the captain’s voice chimed in once more. “Hello, everyone, we’re about to land in Beijing. Current local time is 1:46 am, and the weather is 9 °C. Army personnel have graciously agreed to stay up to this time to greet you, so make sure you are extra kind to them. Please take note that you are 2.5 kilometres away from an active war zone, and so any journey taken outside of the base should be taken with caution. Soldiers will direct you to a briefing inside, where you will be given more information. Thank you.”

When they finally landed, Marcus and Bjørn heard the whirring of the ramp, and felt the crisp, fresh air rush in. The cabin chimed in for the final time.

“This is your First Officer. You haven’t heard me today, but he would like me to tell you on his behalf that you should exit, following the directions of the Beijing *milites*. He and I hope you have a pleasant stay. Thank you.”

They were the first ones to leave, being so close to the exit, and they were greeted by two soldiers.

“Hello, *senatoris*, and your escort. Please head into the building by the nearest door. Please be careful to stay away from anything potentially dangerous.”

Even during this short walk, and even though the battle was relatively far away, Marcus could still hear faint gunfire accompanied by the occasional explosion. In the distance were skyscrapers that could lick space, with massive piles of ash and rubble. The war was only 3 weeks old, and yet it had done carnage.

They entered the complex, and another 2 guards met them at the door.

“Please head to the Briefing Hall. Here’s a map. They will brief you in there. If you get lost, or need help, just alert any soldier who is not busy.”

The briefing hall was on floor -3, which meant it was underground. How far, they didn’t know. The army never disclosed this kind of data, and any person willing to uncover for themselves would be prosecuted for trespassing. It was still well lit, but the walls were painted in a dark grey, which made the rooms feel dark and dirty, even when they weren’t.

Marcus and Bjørn were the first ones to arrive, and the other senators and their escorts filed in rather quickly. They sat on rows of benches, with a man in army uniform standing at the front. He had no hair on the top of his head, it only grew around his ears, and even that was white. He had a wrinkled face, and dark brown eyes. He had lots of medals on his chest,

and he wasn't wearing the regular army uniform, but an olive-green polo shirt with a white collar, and no helmet nearby. He looked like a veteran, like the kind few Marcus had met for interviews and at senate events. When he was sure everybody was there, he ordered two soldiers to close the doors and lock them, to avoid any eavesdropping.

"Hello everyone!" he started, his face getting more wrinkled as he smiled. "I am Alexis, leader of the Beijing *exercitus*. I may look like a veteran, but I assure you, I am still a decent warrior at the age of 54. It is my duty to brief you and show my face. So, let's get started! I am guessing you all met your escorts already, and you will be sleeping in the same room, to maximise your safety. No senator may ask to change their escort, and we have tried to make them as compatible as possible with you. I don't mean that in a bad way, escorts."

They all chuckled.

"Good. During your stay here, you will, unfortunately, have to be interviewed, to help raise public awareness about the conditions we're facing in the war. Some of you will even have to go into the midst of a battle we are unsure who yet.

Meals will be at the same time every day, and a menu will be provided on demand. Your escorts have already been informed of the mealtimes, and will take you to them. Other than that, you will be handed a roster. These will contain your timetable for every day for the next three weeks. There are a range of activities, such as lessons in Mandarin and Cantonese, the native languages of this area, fitness sessions follow-

ing the rigorous army training guidelines, and shooting practice, against still and moving targets and dummies. We will also give everybody down time from 4-5 pm. I hope you all get a good night's rest, and I'll see you at 7:30 tomorrow."

Everyone filed out to head to their rooms. A guard told them their room number a little further up the corridor.

It was 342. It was a spacious room still on floor -3.

It had one single bed and a bunk, with a bathroom, a wardrobe and a television. It was clearly meant for guests, but the TV was rigged to also show *exercitus* messages.

Bjørn happily settled down in the bottom of the bunk, leaving Marcus to take the single. Marcus hit the pillow and crashed, falling straight asleep. He didn't know how Bjørn slept.

The alarm rang at 6:00 am, giving them around 5 hours of sleep. Bjørn was up already, adapted to the military schedule. It took a lot of nudging from Bjørn and a warm cup of coffee to get Marcus up.

"Why do they have to wake us already? We only got 5 hours of sleep!" he demanded.

"Everybody eats at the same time. They're waking us up for breakfast, so they don't have to re-heat our meals. Plus, we have a Mandarin class straight after. No use paying them for work they don't do, right?"

"I guess. Do you reckon they do this to all their guests?"

"I really don't think they get many guests. Mostly senator visits, and career trips, but those are during the day."

"Okay."

Marcus finished his coffee and had a shower. They had warm water, if you were lenient. The soap wasn't scented, and the water automatically cut off after 5 minutes. That was at least reasonable. The rebels had captured 2 of the main reservoirs that served Beijing, so water was scarce for civilians, because they would cut it off as soon as they noticed. After getting dressed, he and Bjørn went to the canteen, where a guard was waiting.

"Please wait here, sirs. We will permit you to the canteen when the rest of your group arrives."

They waited quite a while, because many of the senators were sluggish and un-adapted.

Finally, the guard started a rollcall, before letting them all past. Breakfast was an eggs benedict. They certainly knew how to keep everyone healthy and happy. It was perfectly sprinkled with parsley and chives.

"Looks good, doesn't it Marcus?"

"Yes. Not sure they don't have Albus working here."

"I know you miss them. I'm sure they miss you too."

"Thanks, mate. Anyone missing you?"

"Not anymore. My parents died a while back, and my brother counts me a traitor for fighting for *Latroma*."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. It's not your fault."

"So, where shall we sit? I don't want to sit with the *milites*."

"Wise idea. I doubt that they'd be particularly fond of us being with them as well."

Once they had sat down, another senator and their escort came next to them.

“Hello, Marcus. I must say, you’re a pretty famous senator after that stunt you pulled.”

He sighed. Of course that’s what people knew him for.

“I’m Callipho Pilatus, I was one of the supporters of the China province rebellion suppression.”

“Nice to meet you, *senatoris* Pilatus.”

“Oh, please, Callipho. Let’s not be too formal. So, what do you think of the army base.”

“I like it. I think it’s weird how it never seems to end.”

Callipho was one of those people who asked a question, but never seemed to care what you had to say.

“I think it’s rather quaint, personally. I don’t like how they treat us like soldiers, though. I am a senator, and I expect to be treated as such!”

This was greeted with a grunt from his escort.

“This is my escort. Everybody says he’s a good soldier, but I’ve never heard him speak. I’ll go get us some water.”

He got up and walked off.

“Insufferable man, Callipho,” said his escort. “Honestly, I pretend not to talk just so that he can’t not listen to me.”

“Okay...” was all Marcus could reply.

“So,” said Callipho, returning with a jug full of water, “I sincerely hope that I don’t get forced into battle. I know one end of a gun from the other, of course, who doesn’t in these troubled times? But I doubt I could hit a mark from five metres away.”

Marcus didn't respond; he was too busy wolfing down his food to get away from the pair. Bjørn was already finished, having been taught how to eat food quickly.

"I get it, Marcus. Eat the food quickly, it's so good. Generally, I prefer to eat good food slowly, to savour each bite. But, then of course, agree to disagree, right?"

"Right," replied Marcus, then continued to scoff his eggs benedict.

"Honestly, I never really liked eggs benedict. A bit too much for my taste. Do you agree, Marcus' escort?"

"His name's Bjørn," interrupted Marcus.

"That came out of nowhere! Honestly, I didn't think you'd care, I don't," Callipho dismissed him.

"But I'm not you! I *do* care about other people! And if you want to be so narcissistic and project your image onto everyone else, fine, do it! Just don't do it on me!"

"Oh, dear me, you must be taking all your anger out on me! I'm certainly not selfish. Maybe that's how you feel about others. When we get back to Rome, I know a good therapist I could recommend."

Marcus stood up straight and carried his plate back to the chefs so they could clean it.

He and Bjørn went back to their room.

"*Vide*. I know he was annoying, and I know you were sticking up for me, but did you have to do it in that way? I mean, did you need to be so... *Hva er ordet...* harsh?"

"No, I guess not. He didn't even notice. Anyway, we have to hurry if we are going to get to our Mandarin course."

It was boring. Marcus paid almost no attention to anything anyone was saying. He mostly stared at his book and wondered what Albus and *mater* were up to back at home. He had no way of knowing.

After that was briefing time. They would be briefed on the current conditions of the war, and also anything new that cropped up around base.

As they walked through the door, Alexis greeted them, “Good morning, good morning. Did you all get a good night’s sleep?”

The senators chuckled. Six hours was not enough.

“So, the rebels have captured the China Zun, the tallest building in the vicinity. Unfortunately, this means they have taken anyone sheltering in there captive and can now use it as a place for sniper attacks. Therefore, we will have no activities in the outside gym today. They are also holding back our forces outside of Langfang and are using the crop fields at Luofazen as makeshift runways to mount air attacks outside of Beijing. We also have a little surprise for you. At 2:00 today, we have arranged a videocall for you and your family, in here. This does not include escorts. The call will last 15 minutes. Alright, well I think that’s everything. Enjoy the rest of your day!”

Marcus simply followed the schedule for the rest of the day. Lunch was chicken dumplings. At 2:00 on the dot, everyone assembled in the briefing hall and logged on.

“Marcus, my dear! It’s so good to talk to you! How was your flight? Is Beijing treating you well?” asked *mater*.

“Honestly, you just saw me yesterday!”

“I know, I was just so worried! So much has happened since you left.”

“Like what?”

“What’s the food like there? The accommodation?”

“Good, good. The water is a touch cold though.”

Albus came on screen.

“Oh, it’s started already. Hello, Marcus. How are you finding Beijing?”

“Good, Albus, he’s already told me. You’d know that if you were punctual.”

“I can’t help it if I’m preoccupied!”

“Not too preoccupied to stay and chit-chat however.”

“Wait, *mater*. You said something happened in Rome. What?”

“The rebels blew up the *Publica Bibliotheca*, and took the subway, and riots in the streets led to gun violence. We haven’t left the house in...”

The call cut out, and the screen flickered into life with a message: “Prepare. *Cras*, 10:00.”

Alexis ran to Marcus’ screen, the only one with the message.

“When did this show up? Could it have been sent by one of your *servii*?”

“No, they would never do something like this. It’s a message from the rebels. They’ve hacked the broadcast.”

Alexis turned to his lieutenant.

“Order a full lockdown. Mobilise the *milites*. We must prepare.” He turned to the senators. “Back to your rooms. Be up for breakfast. Get ready to fight.”

Marcus didn’t sleep easily. He lie awake dreading the attack. He must’ve fallen asleep, though, because next thing he knew, he could hear the annoying beep of the alarm.

Groggily, he got ready for the day.

“Don’t worry, Marcus. You won’t have to do any real fighting. You had it on your schedule anyway. Just not as an emergency...”

Breakfast was a simple ration of muesli with butter. Alexis just prepared them for the attack. Marcus was in squadron 453.

Chapter 7

They all gathered in front of the base, in full armour. All the senators had been trusted with a laser blade and a small, but powerful handgun. They stood behind the barricade, in deafening silence. No one dared to speak. Not here, not now.

Planes hovered in mid-air, and ATVs were idling just ahead. They were in position. It felt like minutes, hours, just waiting. At the stroke of ten, the enemy appeared out of camouflage. They were much closer than previously expected a few metres away. Too close. They were wearing pirated models of the normal armour, painted in red and gold. The colours of rebellion. The vehicles swerved around to intercept them. The gunfire started immediately. Marcus tripped, falling behind the sandbags, narrowly being missed by an overhead bullet. The enemy line began to advance. Bjørn stayed standing and shot enemy soldiers down with steady aim. An *exercitus* gunship exploded with a flash of bright red and orange, the flaming wreck falling to the ground just 50 meters away. Its adversary continued towards them. Marcus shook, under cover. Afraid. Soldiers all around him were firing or being fired at or dead. There was no other way to win. It was all for the good of the people.

“Prime the missiles!” blared Alexis’ voice from speakers in Marcus’ headset at least. The soldiers remaining in the base followed their orders; they opened the silos to the sky. Streams of smoke flew across the sky, 10 or 15 of them. They

hit the planes, irrespective of their owners, and the sky lit up orange.

“Are you okay, Marcus?” asked Bjørn. Marcus shook his head. He was in pain, lots of it, aching everywhere.

Bjørn understood him, by his lack of speech, and propped him up on his shoulder.

The squadron commander ordered an advance. Everyone around Marcus got to their feet and began the march. Bjørn dragged Marcus to the back of the group. He drew his blade out of the sheath with his teeth and put it in his left hand. Bullets whizzed past them from every direction. Boom! Another ship fell from the sky, and another. An ATV up ahead hit a flying grenade and flipped over. The squadron froze on order drawing rifles. The enemies were everywhere. Who knew who was friend or foe anymore?

Missiles from rocket launchers positioned far away hit the base, sending piles of rubble crumbling onto the ground with a flash of orange.

“Divert forces to *Dayuan!*” blared a voice Marcus didn’t recognise.

Bjorn did, as he sprang to attention.

“Tank! Run!” yelled the commander, pointing forwards.

They all sprinted in, in pairs. The tank drove straight at the enemy. The metal, cobalt blue walls were being dented by bullets, pattering down. The tank shook as it fired a rocket, and a next. A building nearby, a civilian crumbled into rubble. The rebels would sacrifice people, people who could fight for them, to scare the *exercitus*. The tank rolled onto its side and

the door broke off its hinges. They were surrounded by heavily armoured rebels, who were only being hit back at the front lines. Suddenly, a bullet flew at Bjørn, piercing his armour.

“Bjørn!” Marcus cried.

“It’s okay, Marcus. It was bound to happen anyway. At least this way I make it to Valhalla.”

“But I just met you! You’re my friend!”

“Nothing ever stays the same. Goodbye.”

His eyes glazed over. Marcus, in a haze of fury, glanced around for the person who had killed him, and pushed his way over there while the rest of his squadron held defensive positions. He wasn’t hard to kill. And then Marcus was knocked over. One of the enemies had jumped at him from behind. Marcus picked his face up out of the dirt and desperately tried to shake himself free. But it was a futile attempt. The rebel hit him with the butt of his gun, and Marcus swam through a sea of black.

He didn’t know how long it was until he came to. His hands and legs were cuffed, and they were chained to the wall. He sat up and looked around. He must have been caught. Who else was caught? He looked through the bars of the cell. In the one opposite was Callipho. Of course it was. He was too incompetent to defend himself.

“Hello, Marcus. I was wondering how long it would be until you awoke. Obviously, I woke up first, physique, you understand,” he boasted.

“You. Why must it be you?”

“I don’t know, Marcus. Ask the Fates! Anyway, I saw your escort.”

“You saw Bjørn? Where? Is he okay?”

“Just a few moments ago. They were carrying him to where they store their corpses,” he laughed.

Marcus wanted to wring Callipho’s neck. He didn’t get a chance, since two guards came round and took him. Marcus sat bored in his cell until a guard came later and delivered Marcus some rancid slop masquerading as food if you could even call it that. They unchained him and supervised him whilst he ate. It wasn’t much, but Marcus ate it greedily. It was all he had. Two more guards relieved him of his duty, and blindfolded Marcus. They dragged him out of the cell. He didn’t try to fight. That would probably be more fatal than not doing anything.

He heard voices.

“We have the *senatoris*,” started one voice.

“Good. You may head back to your schedule. And your partner will stay here, and guard him while he’s with us,” replied a second, a woman’s voice.

“If I may though, *princeps*, aren’t partners supposed to stay together to protect one another in the face of danger?”

“I have given you direct orders. Return to schedule and inform your unit commander if required.”

“Of course, *princeps*. ”

Marcus could hear footsteps as the first person walked away. His blindfold was removed, and they shoved him into what looked like a meeting room. It was full of people. They sat

him down, and the guard, the other person's partner, shadowed Marcus.

"So, *senatoris*, I see we finally have you away from the claws of *Latroma*."

"I'm not going to aid you in any way if that's what you want. At least, that's how you've made it seem, with that rebel attack on the Amphitheatre."

"It would be more beneficial if you did support us, perhaps for both parties. But we can suffice with keeping you hostage."

"I am just curious, if you had to get the information from me, what techniques would you use."

"Well, we do have a rather complex form of brainwashing, but that would be no use since we would have to conceal most of the information from you. No, instead we are just going to rely on Stockholm syndrome for now."

Brainwashing! So that must be what they took Callipho for, he thought

"Why didn't you capture any other senators? Why me?"

"We did capture others. However, they were all no use. We have decided to make them model soldiers. You're the only one that has what we want."

"What I want is to return to Rome. And if you can't grant me that right, I will not cooperate," Marcus retorted

"We will grant your freedom, in time. But not before we get what we want."

"Which is?"

"Aid in the rebellion. We need a reach outside of this area, in the reaches of *Latroma*. We need strategic aid, in fighting this

battle against the greater power of the *Latroman* army. You are the most useful for this, you shall aid in this rebellion. Then, your return to Rome, a greater Rome, a fairer Rome, shall be ensured.”

“But I am no different than the other senators. I am equal to them in image. Why do you prefer me to them?”

“Humble though you are Marcus, you are different in image. To the public, you are young, kind, smart, and still maybe naïve. You aren’t rich or stuck-up. People will listen to you Marcus. And that is what we want.”

“But in military aid, you have, you are all military commanders. You were in the *Latroman* army, were you not, *princeps?*” Marcus spat out that last word sarcastically.

“Indeed, I was, but as one such as yourself should know, battlefields tactics and command are institutionally separate from overarching military. The question is where and how.

We need a military consul, not another flag-bearer.”

“This does not seem fair.”

“How so?” asked *princeps*.

“In aiding you, I forsake my image, my job, my friends, my beliefs. In return, I get my voyage back to those who would hate me, spit on me. Death would be preferable.”

“Indeed, but for a just cause, no cost is too great. We are able to issue a statement to your household, to explain your position. And when those in Rome realise the New World, you shall be seen as a fighter of the free. We can offer you a pension, honours, what you will need. *Democratia* does not and

won't allow for permanent positions, but your presence at meeting will be noted."

"An interesting proposition. May I have time to decide?"

"Two hours, in your cell."

Princeps clapped his hands, and a pair of guards appeared and returned him to his cell.

Marcus thought at length over this decision, pacing up and down. At long last, he told the guards that he had made his decision and was summoned to the *princeps* at once.

"So, *senatoris*, I trust your decision has been made?" he questioned.

"Indeed, though I have one condition of my own to add."

"Which is?"

"I would like to be able to remain in contact with my household, as I would have been able to at the military base."

"This is no trouble, but if they reveal your whereabouts to anyone, they shall be severely punished."

"And I with them."

Marcus was led to the mess hall, where lunch was being served to a gathering of hungry soldiers.

The meal was nice, a ratatouille of sorts, using vegetables sourced on site in event of emergency.

Everything in the rebel base was like that, the *milites* could cut them off at any time.

The rebel soldiers didn't seem to like Marcus very much.

They refused to talk to him or sit near him. He had his meal in silence, unbothered and uncared for by the world around him.

After finishing, Marcus decided to return to his cell. The door was left unlocked and slightly ajar, as though someone had been in there. It was locked when he had left.

A few hours passed, he sat in silence, until a guard noticed him.

“*Bona noctem, senatoris,*” the guard greeted him. “Should you not be in your room rather than a prisoner’s cell?”

“This is my cell, is it not? *Princeps* said little.”

“Ah, so you have spoken to him. We have orders to accommodate you as best as possible. Come, let me take you.”

The guard led Marcus away, up a flight of stairs quite some way from the holding cells.

“Here, *senatoris*. This is where you shall stay for the time being.”

“*Vero*. I believe you are owed a promotion, my friend.”

The guard chuckled, “Fighting for my cause is promotion enough.”

The room was nothing special, a bed was in the corner, with a bathroom and a shower opposite. There was a desk against the left-hand wall, with a potted plant and a radio on top along with some type of remote, all according to rules of *feng shui*. Curious, Marcus picked up the remote and clicked the “on” button.

He hadn’t noticed anything happen at first, but as he decided to lay on his bed to collect his thoughts, a screen flickered to life from the wall by the door.

It didn’t contain much in the way of entertainment, but there was a timetable which was surprisingly empty, a map of the

site and a list of rebel successes which scrolled by next to a widget containing the weather.

Having nothing to do, Marcus decided he would turn on the radio. Some soothing music began to play, and he lay on the bed and hummed along.

He had to eat dinner in the mess hall later that day, and some soldiers had opened up to the idea of having a senator among them.

“Enjoying your stay, *senatoris*?” one of them teased, passing by.

“Well, I can say that you have the most behaved forces I’ve seen.”

The soldier seemed to change his mind, sitting down in front of Marcus.

“We have a cause to fight for, *dominus*. We can’t let our chances slip through our fingers.”

“I wouldn’t think so, you call it a worthy cause. But we think ours worthier.”

“They have some nerve the army!” cried the soldier. “Fighting against those who are protected by them. They will get no protection for me, and before the new high court when charged for that.”

“Well, I am here so long as it will take me to convince your *princeps* to return me to Rome, and in that time, I won’t fight for your cause.”

“What if *princeps* makes you?”

“Come again?” Marcus asked, confused.

“What if you are made to fight for our cause in order to get home? If you are made to believe, will you really want to return at all?”

“If you convince me, I will return to fight with you, and you will fight in Rome. But I doubt that.”

“You doubt it now, for now.”

The soldier hadn’t finished his soup, but he stood up suddenly and left. Marcus watched him as he walked away but couldn’t work out where he went. It was probably nothing, but he had a feeling that he wasn’t welcome here, despite what the leaders might say.

His troubled day was followed by a troubled night. Marcus didn’t get much sleep that he could remember and spent most of the night pacing around his room. Did the *Latroman* army mark him as missing? Dead? What have they told *mater*? It was un-aided by the constant yelling. This place never slept. There was always some division working, preparing, waiting. Before it was even light out he heard gunshots. A flash of red and orange came through the window. Yelling, crumbling. A skyscraper fell. He couldn’t see anything in the pitch black, but there were planes flying ahead, bombing the city, killing innocent people.