

TOMES *of the* DEAD

# ANNO MORTIS

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At least the dead fell behind a little, unwilling to match their suicidal dash. Petronius could see that there were three chariots' full of them, one two-horse affair like theirs and two more that were pulled by four. If they reached anywhere wide enough to let the horses have their head, the larger chariots would easily overtake them. But these narrow streets had dangers of their own.

Petronius pulled desperately on the rein with one hand as he clung to Nero's collar with his other. The horses were slow to obey. Maybe they'd been waiting all these years for a chance to truly let loose. Or maybe they could smell the stench of decay behind them. As they galloped into a small, statue-lined square, Petronius could see a desperate white froth around their mouths and knew they couldn't keep up this pace for long.

He yanked again, harder, and this time the horses obeyed - far too enthusiastically. They reared as they drew to a complete and sudden halt, neighing their fury. Behind them, the other chariots raced on, too surprised to stop in time. The dead were closing in, milky eyes glaring malevolently and mouths stretched wide in grins that anticipated victory.

An Abaddon Books™ Publication

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First published in 2008 by Abaddon Books™, Rebellion Intellectual Property Limited,  
Riverside House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, UK.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN (.epub format): 978-1-84997-016-7

ISBN (.mobi format): 978-1-84997-038-9

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**ANNO MORTIS**

Rebecca Levene

*Dedicated to Helena, David, Sam, Elliot and Kate Derbyshire - for being top-notch friends, and jolly good coves all round.*

## PROLOGUE

Boda hadn't known there were so many people in the world. The tiers of the amphitheatre rose into the sky, each packed with humanity. And all of them here to watch her die. She hadn't known there was so much hate inside her, either, but she felt it now: for these people, this place, this city.

They'd given her a short sword, stumpy and useless compared to the heavy blade she'd carried since she was a girl. A small round shield had been strapped to her arm. They'd told her she was lucky, that these were the easiest weapons for her first match. But she'd seen in their eyes that they didn't expect her to survive it.

The walls of the arena were white marble, too high to climb. If they hadn't been, she would have taken her sword to the throats of the overfed rabble who looked on the fighters beneath them and saw only a morning's entertainment.

Far above her in the crowd, a man in a white toga rose to his feet. Ripples of silence spread out around him, and Boda guessed that this must be their leader, the Caesar. He raised his arms, and around her the other gladiators did the same.

Boda kept hers by her side. The man beside her, an ebony-skinned giant, gestured for her to join the salute. Boda ignored him. She owed no fealty to her people's conquerors.

A trickle of sweat worked its way between her shoulder blades, beneath the leather straps of her armour. It was so unbearably hot in this country. She searched in her mind for a cool memory to counter the relentless sun, but when she tried to imagine the woodland of her home, the green pine trees faded until they were as white as the marble pillars that held up this city, and the snow turned into the sand beneath her feet.

There was a shuffling, an aura of barely contained excitement, and Boda guessed that the fight was about to begin. She already knew her opponent. She'd trained with him many times in the three months she'd been captive here. He spoke little Latin, a prisoner of war like herself, though from distant Judea. His hair was dark, his skin too, a man the colour of oak.

He was carrying a net slung over his left arm and a trident in his right. His eyes appraised her, but weren't afraid. He'd bested her every time they fought, using his superior weight to overpower her when his technique failed him.

He was a fool. All those weeks she'd been holding back, learning her opponent's techniques, strengths, weaknesses, while revealing nothing of her own. Her people didn't fight as if it was a game. They prayed to Tiu, then bathed their swords in their enemies' blood.

But there wasn't time to pray now. The signal to begin had been given, and already Boda could hear the metal clash of weapons around her and the copper stink of blood.

Petronius had always hated the games. All that bloodshed, and for what? He far preferred the theatre, but lately his father had forbidden his attendance there. His father had said it was unmanly. Unmanly! As if there was anything to a man's credit in watching other people fight and die for his amusement. Petronius knew very well that his father, a prosperous merchant, had never once raised a sword in anger. But he'd be the first to call for blood when a gladiator lost his match.

Below them, the pairs of fighters had engaged with a clash of steel. Petronius's eyes

scanned over them, uninterested, until they hooked and caught on one figure.

Her blonde hair and ice-pale skin marked her as a member of the barbarian tribes from the far north. She was tall, too - as tall as him, and he towered over many other Romans. From this distance, he couldn't tell if she was beautiful, but he decided to assume that she was. It would make the fight more engrossing.

If it lasted. At the moment, she was doing little more than defending herself, ducking to slide under the swing of the net, almost losing her footing as she dodged back from a fierce trident thrust. Many dull afternoons spent attending the games had taught him that the gladiator known as the retiarius, who looked so under-equipped against sword and shield, was actually a formidable opponent. And he'd seen this particular fighter before. He was a ten-times champion, undefeated in the arena.

Another thrust of the trident, a bright red line on the barbarian woman's thigh, and Petronius looked away. Such a terrible waste. If only her captors had sold her to him, and not to the gladiator school, he could have found a much more pleasant use for her. One he'd wager she would have enjoyed far more.

His father's slave girls certainly never had any complaints. Although, to be fair, they would have been whipped if they had.

Narcissus knew he had to pretend to watch the games. His master Claudius had brought him here to reward him for his hard work. There were other slaves in the arena, but they were standing far above, hidden from their betters behind a wall. The least he could do was pretend to enjoy the privilege of being here.

He tried. It was certainly dynamic. Below him, the pair who had first caught his eyes, the barbarian and the Judean, were already dripping red droplets of blood onto the yellow sand. She was slighter than him, but nimble on her feet, and the bigger, darker man had been underestimating her, allowing her to use the same move twice to slip in beneath his guard before he realised his mistake. Now he looked angry, and Narcissus doubted he'd hold back from a killing blow if he got the chance.

The crowd loved it. They roared their approval every time a blow was struck, the sound doubling and redoubling itself as it echoed from the high stone walls. Narcissus felt overwhelmed by it, and the sour-sweat smell of the 50,000 plebeians all around them.

He'd seen gladiators die before. He'd seen slaves beaten, or crucified, or just left to rot slowly away from diseases it wasn't worth paying the doctor to treat. And every time, he thought: that could be me. One day soon, it might be.

Despite himself, his eyes were drawn away from the match, back into the stands to the seated figure above him.

Caligula held all their lives in his fine-boned hands. He seemed to sense Narcissus' regard, and for a moment he was trapped like an insect in the frozen blue ice of the emperor's gaze. Then Caligula looked away, eyelids drooping languidly, as if even getting angry with an uppity slave took more effort than he could spare.

Narcissus let out a long, shuddering sigh of relief. Caesar's curly blond hair was lank and greasy, plastered close to his puffy face, and the dark circles around his eyes were as livid as bruises. He'd heard rumours about Caligula, that the young ruler had started suffering nightmares that woke him screaming in the middle of the night. But then, Narcissus thought bitterly, a man who'd done the things Caligula had didn't

deserve an untroubled sleep.

He switched his gaze to his own master, sitting on the cold stone beside him. Claudius was hunched in on himself, as if he was trying to make his frail body even less visible. His neck was bent at an unnatural angle, holding his face out of Caligula's line of sight. Narcissus wanted to tell him that it was futile, that the less he wanted his nephew to notice him, the more likely it was that Caligula would single him out for the torment that seemed to be his main delight these days.

Not that standing up to Caesar would help, either. Caligula had been known to kill men simply for kneeling too slowly in his presence. Claudius had been kept alive when all around were slaughtered only because he amused Caligula.

Claudius also seemed to feel Narcissus' eyes on him. He jerked a startled look in his slave's direction, then smiled warmly. "En-en-en-joying yourself?" he stuttered.

A thin trickle of saliva seeped out of the corner of his mouth along with the words, and Narcissus quickly reached up to wipe it away before anyone else could notice.

"Yes, dominus," he said. "I'm grateful you brought me here."

That, at least, was true.

Caligula watched with disgust as Claudius chattered to that thin-faced, awkward Greek slave of his. The soft-hearted fool treated the boy more like a son than a possession. Caligula had often thought of having the slave killed, or maybe just disfigured in some way. He imagined the look on Claudius's face as he watched his favourite branded or flogged. But in truth, it was more fun to keep as a threat held over his uncle's head. Not that he needed threats to keep the old stutterer in line.

There was a sudden roar from the crowd around him, deep-throated with satiated blood lust. No doubt one of the matches below had ended in a kill. Caligula didn't bother to look himself - these games bored him now. He'd considered abolishing them altogether, but that blustering bore Seneca had persuaded him that the lower ranks of Rome would take ill to losing their entertainment.

Not that he feared the people. Hadn't they lined the streets to cheer him when he'd returned in triumph from his conquest of the sea itself? He'd showered them with seashells, the spoils of the ocean taken on his daring campaign, and they'd cheered till they were hoarse. He knew that they adored him.

And if they ever ceased to love him, well... When a legion rebelled, decimation was the prescribed punishment, the death of every tenth man.

Caligula amused himself by imagining which of the crowd around him he'd kill in a decimation. Claudius's beloved slave, of course. And there, three rows above, that broad-hipped woman in the blue tunica was far too ugly to live. Her beautiful young daughter would be spared, at least until she'd served her purpose, but the bearded man behind her would have to go. Caligula wondered if he'd scream as his throat was slit, and smiled to imagine it.

The smile slid away into nothing as the crushing boredom descended once again. It seemed nothing could amuse him for long these days. Ever since he'd realised that he was a god, the petty concerns of these mortals had left him yawning. He turned to ask Drusilla if she felt the same -

- and realised, as he always realised, with a sickening jolt of grief, that she wasn't there. That his sister hadn't been there for two years now, and would never be there



again. Because no prayer, no offering, no sacrifice of his had been able to bring back the only person he'd ever loved from the shadowy realms of death. And what was the use, really, of being a god, if you couldn't do the one thing you desperately wanted?

Caligula leaned back, closing his eyes so that those around him couldn't see the hot tears gathering beneath their lids.

Seneca watched the procession of emotions chase each other across his emperor's face. He was thinking about that wretched sister of his again, Seneca could tell. Every time he thought of her, he'd spend a few hours - or sometimes a few days - in the depths of the blackest despair, before suddenly switching to a quite lunatic happiness, gorging himself on the pleasures of the flesh until he sickened of them and sank back into despair once again.

Seneca had seen the same cycle play through a hundred times by now. He'd never paid half the attention to his studies in rhetoric that he paid to studying Caesar, though he was regarded as one of the greatest rhetoricians of the age. But then, his ability to move crowds could bring him fame and wealth. His life depended on his ability to read Caligula's capricious moods.

Now Caligula's petulant features were slowly melting into the slackness of sleep, and Seneca looked away at last and back to the fighting below. He knew that, as a man of learning and philosophy, he shouldn't take quite as much pleasure in these things as he did. But this was life in the raw, stripped down to its bare essentials - kill, or be killed.

Just such a decision was being made at this moment in the arena below. It was the barbarian woman he'd noticed before. She was a beauty, he supposed, if you cared for that unhealthily white skin and hair the colour of straw. But he'd marked her for death the instant she stepped out, matched against the undefeated Josephus.

An error in judgement, as it turned out. She'd beaten the bigger Judean down to his knees, his trident thrown to the sand behind him and his own net tangled hopelessly about his feet.

The barbarian woman raised her short sword high, poised for a killing blow. The crowd around Seneca drew in its breath, a hissing susurrations as if from the throat of one vast creature, ready to call for clemency. But she didn't give them time. Her sword flashed in the sun as it fell, and then her pale skin and hair were streaked with scarlet, pumping up in great gouts from the fallen man's throat.

The roar of the crowd that followed was a strange noise, half disapproval, half joy in the brutal slaughter. The barbarian made no acknowledgement of it, kneeling calmly to wipe her sword on her fallen opponent's tunic.

Beside him, Seneca felt his companion stirring. He turned to look at her, but beneath the hood of her cloak, only the cherry-red pout of her lips was visible. They were smiling.

"A fresh body," she said. "Young and virile. It will serve our purposes admirably."

Seneca nodded. Everything was already arranged at the gladiator school, so getting his hands on the corpse shouldn't prove to be a problem. And then...

Then Caligula would see who held the real power in Rome.

## PART ONE

### Et In Arcadia Ego

#### CHAPTER ONE

At first, Boda thought the other gladiators were staring at her because she'd stripped herself to bathe in the fountain in the school's central courtyard. The Romans were like her own people, comfortable in their skins and untroubled by others'. But some of the men here, the easterners, treated women's bodies as if they were something filthy from which the world needed to be carefully shielded.

To spite them, she turned round as the cool water splashed over her, washing the last vestiges of blood away, and gave the other gladiators a good view of her small, high breasts.

A few of the men did seem transfixed by them, eyes swinging in time with her pink nipples. But the bulk of them kept their gazes on her face, glaring with an anger so fierce it seemed to charge the air around her, like a lightning storm.

"You killed him," said Evius, the bald Greek whose head was as round and smooth as an egg.

"Yes," she said. "Sorry to disappoint you." The Latin words still felt sharp and awkward in her mouth, but she'd learnt the language well enough to make herself understood. She'd known it even before she was taken prisoner, a useful skill when there were captives to be interrogated or enemy camps to be infiltrated.

Evius made a grab for her arm, but she twisted out of his reach, reaching for a sword that no longer hung at her side.

He saw and smiled unpleasantly. "You didn't need to kill him," he said. "He was popular, he fought well - the crowd would have spared him."

Around her, Boda saw the others nodding and murmuring their agreement. "It was him or me," she said, "and I chose me."

"It could have been neither!" That was Josephus's fellow Judean, Adam ben Meir. "We're professionals, not barbarians - well, most of us, anyway. It doesn't have to be a fight to the death. The idea is to put on a good show, not get anyone else killed."

For the first time, Boda felt unsure of herself. She hadn't bothered to talk to the other gladiators in her weeks of training. None were of her tribe, and she didn't make a habit of befriending enemies. Could it be that she'd misunderstood?

"I had to defend myself," she said. "He was trying to kill me."

"It was an act! A show! But the next time, barbarian... The next time you lift your sword in the arena - watch your back."

He spun on his heel and left the atrium before Boda could respond. But the threat remained, hanging heavy in the air behind him.

Narcissus trailed at Claudius's heels as they made their way back to the palace. A red press of uniforms surrounded them, the Praetorian Guard whose sole duty lay in the defence of Caesar's life. Their leader, Marcus, walked behind Caligula himself, leather-sheathed sword thwacking against his muscular thigh with every stride.

Wherever they passed, the people of Rome stopped and stared and cheered and

Caligula smiled beneficently at them, accepting their tribute as his due.

Narcissus wondered how the people would have behaved if the Praetorian Guard hadn't been there. He grinned helplessly at the thought, looking down before anyone could catch him at it. His eyes, as they often did, found themselves fixed on the wooden tablet which hung around his neck and marked him as a slave.

The sun had passed its zenith now, and the streets they walked through were so narrow that the shadow of the buildings enveloped them entirely. Narcissus was grateful for a respite from the oppressive heat. All of Rome had been sweating under it for days now, with no sign of a break. He supposed he should be grateful he hadn't been sold to one of the bakers whose shops lined the street they were currently traversing. The smell of the bread wafted out from the ovens, where the owners' slaves toiled through the long day and into the night, their sweat mingling with the raw dough.

Ahead of him, Claudius stumbled suddenly, tripping over a loose flagstone. His arms flailed, trying to regain his balance.

Taken off guard, Narcissus made a wild grab for him. His fingers hooked into the back of his toga and pulled - and the cloth came away in his hand, leaving Claudius flat on his face on the ground wearing nothing but his loincloth. He blushed a red so virulent it looked diseased.

There was a peel of high, cruel laughter from ahead. Caligula. He'd turned just in time to catch Claudius's disrobing. After a second, given permission to mock their betters by the Emperor himself, the soldiers of the Praetorian Guard also started laughing.

Claudius tried to scramble to his feet, then seemed to realise that this would expose even more of him to ridicule, and sat back down again.

Finally regaining his wits, Narcissus leapt forward, holding out the folded white cloth of the toga to wrap back round his master. Claudius reached out a hand to grab it, avoiding Narcissus's eyes. The worst thing, Narcissus thought, was that Claudius wouldn't beat him for this. His master wasn't angry, he was upset that Narcissus had seen him so publicly humiliated.

"Oh, there's no need for that," Caligula drawled. "I'm sure my uncle will appreciate the breeze without one." And he held out his hand too, demanding the toga.

And this, Narcissus thought, was the moment. This was his chance to prove himself a man, no matter that he was one who could be bought and sold. This was when he could repay Claudius for all his kindness over the years.

He imagined, for a moment, the gratitude in Claudius's eyes. The pride, as Narcissus ignored the demands of his emperor and handed the toga to his master instead.

And then, even more vividly, he pictured Caligula waving at the Praetorian Guard in that uncaring way of his. He saw them falling on him with the pommels of their swords until they'd beaten him into unconsciousness. Dragging his limp body to the Esquiline Gate. He felt the terrible agony as the nails were driven through his wrists, and the cross raised.

He took two steps forward, and handed the toga to Caligula.

The Emperor smiled. He shot one sly, triumphant look at Claudius, still sprawled on the paving slabs where he'd fallen, then slung an arm around Narcissus's neck.

"What's your name, slave?" he asked.

The words stuck behind the lump of shame in his throat. He forced them out with a cough. "Narcissus, dominus."

"Narcissus. Well, not really as beautiful as the myths say, but..." He ran his hand down the slope of Narcissus's shoulder, down his back to cup his buttock beneath his thin tunic. "You'll do."

Narcissus lowered his eyes submissively, afraid of what Caligula might read in them. "I am at my Emperor's command."

"Of course you are!" Caligula said, suddenly pulling away. He turned back to Claudius, who had finally dragged himself to his feet. "Uncle, I want your slave. Give him to me."

Narcissus knew that Claudius was very good at keeping his real feelings from his face. It was how he'd survived so long in the court of the mad Emperor, virtually the only member of his family who had. But he couldn't disguise his expression of dismay now. "He's been with me si-si-sixteen years!" he said. "I bought him when he was just a b-b-boy!"

Caligula shrugged. "Then he must be more than ready for a change of scene. Really, uncle, it's terribly selfish of you to want to keep an energetic young man like this all to yourself."

"B-b-but— "

"I'll go," Narcissus blurted out. He hung his head, because what did it say about him, that his poor, crippled master had the courage to stand up to Caligula for his sake, and Narcissus had none? "I'll gladly go with you, dominus."

Caligula beamed and Narcissus looked only at him and never at Claudius, so he wouldn't have to see the betrayal in his master's eyes.

Boda took her flatbread to a quiet corner to brood. Now that battle was no longer heating her blood, she could think more clearly. She closed her eyes and watched a memory unfold behind her eyelids, the moment when the Roman soldiers had found her, miles from her tribe and without hope of help.

There had been four of them, two so young they'd barely started shaving and all of them shivering in the northern cold. But their swords were sharp and clean and there had been only a moment of hesitation before they were all pointed at her.

One she could have taken. Maybe two. But four? For a second she'd considered charging forward anyway, dying a glorious death. It would have been the honourable thing to do, and her tribe would have sung songs and drunk mead to her memory.

Honour and glory. In that instant, Boda learnt a shameful thing about herself. She cared more about life than either of them.

Her sword had left a deep imprint in the snow as she dropped it. She remembered seeing the yellow petals of a newly sprouted daffodil, crushed beneath the tip.

And she realised now that, in that moment, she'd stopped thinking, because her thoughts were too painful. She'd let instinct alone and long years of training carry her through the terrible journey back to Rome, the pain of branding, the humiliation of sale at a slave auction and the long, bruising training at the gladiator school.

Instinct had told her that the other gladiators were enemies, only to be fought, and she hadn't questioned it. And now a man was dead because she had never thought that

he too was a slave. She'd never seen that these people were her brothers, not her adversaries.

The people of Rome were not all of one tribe, and it was wrong to treat them so. Who was she, without honour or kin, to look down on others who had made choices no worse than hers?

And there was something else, now that she was thinking again, now that she'd stopped drifting through the world like a spirit, as if she really had died in the dark and ancient woodland of her home.

Why had no one told her that the games were a performance, no more real than the spear-shaking dance that initiated the youths of her people into adulthood? Why had Quintus, the trainer of the gladiator school, not told her? His employers had paid much gold for her and all the others; he should be the most eager of all to save the lives of their possessions.

She saw him now, a fat, silver-haired old man who always stank of violets. He glanced quickly at her, then away and his pace increased, little mincing steps turning into a half trot as he moved away from her.

She sprang to her feet, intercepting him before he could enter the private quarters where the gladiators weren't allowed.

"Quintus - a question."

He turned with an oily smile. "For you, my barbarian beauty, anything."

"The games today. The others - they told me I wasn't supposed to kill Josephus. Is that true?"

"You're a warrior, my petal, my thorny white rose. Fierceness is what the crowd expects of you." He turned away, obviously hoping she'd be satisfied with that.

She took two long paces to put herself back in front of him. "Fierceness, yes. But is it supposed to be real, or a show?"

He waved an expansive arm in the air. "How are such things to be distinguished? All life is a performance, or so they say."

"Real, or not?" she persisted grimly.

He sighed and his eyes darted to left and right, as if checking to see whether anyone was close enough to overhear. They weren't. "There is perhaps an element, the merest hint of showmanship, my dove..."

"Then why in Odin's name didn't you tell me?"

His eyes shifted again. Not looking for anything this time, just avoiding hers. And she knew that whatever he said next would be a lie.

He was saved from voicing it by a commotion, over by the door to the school. "How painful it is to leave you mid-conversation," he said. "But alas, that terrible task-master duty calls."

He slid from her side quicker than a man his size should have been able to move, and headed towards the source of the sound.

Boda considered letting him go. She'd discovered that he was hiding something. Anything beyond that he was unlikely to reveal. But there was something about the noise from the doorway - not any words she could make out, just a tone that was hauntingly familiar - and she found herself following Quintus.

"What's this?" he said. "A fox in the hencoop? Someone come to disturb the peace and tranquillity I've worked so hard to foster?"

"Just a beggar," said Aulus, the youngest and meekest of Quintus's household slaves.

"Then give him some bread and send him on his way."

"I've tried, dominus! He says he won't go without bread and wine."

"Does he now?" Quintus turned back to the door, an unpleasant expression on his face.

Boda moved beside him, getting a clear view of the beggar for the first time.

"Absolutely," the beggar said. "And make the wine something decent - none of that Spanish crap!"

He was tall, red-haired and pale-skinned, with a fine dusting of freckles over the sharp spike of his nose. Boda felt a flare of something warm and hopeful in her belly. She had never met him before, but she knew his face all the same. This was a man of the Cimbri, of her people. She could hear it in his voice, the accent as he spoke Latin a mirror of her own.

She knew he recognised her too. His gaze appraised her and seemed pleased with what it found. "Greetings, clanswoman," he said in her own language.

She lowered her head, to acknowledge him and to hide her face. She didn't want Quintus to read whatever might be written there. She knew that it was too open, a vulnerability she didn't want to show.

Quintus must have guessed some of it. "One of your own?" he said. "How fortuitous, my virgin huntress. Then you may find him the stalest bread and the dregs of last night's wine, and send him on his way." He smiled thinly and left, clearly glad to be rid of them both.

"I am Vali," the beggar said. His eyes, she saw, were a startling red-brown, unusual for her people. They stared into her own blue ones with amused frankness.

"I am Boda, daughter of Berthold," she said. "A captive here."

"Will you show me to the kitchen, then, and the food I've been promised?"

She nodded. "I'm sure I can find something a little better than stale bread for a hungry man." There was a hungry look about him - in the thin, sharp angles of his face.

"And in return," he said. "I have something to show you."

She paused to shoot him a puzzled look. He was wearing nothing but a tunic, too light to hide anything beneath it.

"Something here," he told her. "A secret darkness in this place."

He walked ahead before she could ask him what he meant. Straight towards the kitchen, as if he already knew where it was.

Petronius sprawled on the bed, wondering if life could get any better. A slave girl under one arm, a slave boy under the other, and food and wine enough to sate the entire Ninth Legion. Best of all, he could feel himself beginning to recover from their previous exertions. More pleasure, he felt, was definitely imminent.

Which was why he was particularly displeased when his father strode through the doorway, throwing the two slaves such savagely disapproving looks that they instantly slunk from the room.

"What?" Petronius said. "We were only just getting started!"

His father glared. "You've been in here two hours."

"Exactly."

"You're a disgrace."

"That's not what they were saying half an hour ago."

It was a familiar argument, and one they'd had so often before that Petronius felt his father hardly needed him there to supply his half of the exchange. Except this time, the other man veered wildly off script.

"It's over," his father said. "Enough. You're a man, or -" a pause for him to slowly eye Petronius up and down "- so the calendar tells us. Fifteen years old, and no achievement to your name bar the impregnation of five slaves and the debauching of Jupiter knows how many others."

"That's what they're for," Petronius protested. But he rose to his feet, clutching the bed sheet around him. He felt, though he wasn't quite sure why, that he was about to get some news which needed to be received standing up. His curling black hair was a tangled mess, and he raked a hand through to tidy it, then gave his father the most meltingly innocent look his big brown eyes would allow.

"You're no use to me, you're a disgrace to the family name," his father continued, clearly unmoved. "And it's my fault. I've indulged you. I've allowed you to laze around the house, doing nothing more productive than scribbling a few words when the fancy takes you and claiming you're planning to be a playwright. A playwright! No, it won't do. It's time you started a profession suitable for a man of your station."

A beam of light crept through one of the house's high windows as his father spoke, casting his shadow onto the wall behind him like a harbinger of death.

Petronius shivered involuntarily. "Writing is an honourable profession. Phaedrus is a highly respected man."

His father sniffed. "By the plebeians, maybe."

Petronius forbore to point out that their own family had been plebeian themselves a mere two generations ago. He didn't think now was a good time to be antagonising his father. "I'm not suitable for anything else," he tried instead. "You've said so yourself - who would put up with a no-good wastrel such as myself?"

"A very good question," his father said ominously. "Happily, today I found the answer. Seneca is in need of an apprentice of good family, and despite having heard every sordid tale of your behaviour buzzing through Rome, he declares himself happy to take you on. No doubt it's because he's a Stoic - they're said to crave hardship and unpleasantness."

"Seneca?" Petronius said. "What can that dusty old bore possibly teach me?"

His father smiled for the first time since entering the room. "Rhetoric. I've thought long and hard, and there's only one career in which you can possibly excel - politics. With your propensity for lying and lechery, the Senate should feel like a home from home."

Petronius let himself fall backwards onto the bed and closed his eyes. He was hoping that when he opened them again this would all prove to have been a dream.

Caligula talked to Narcissus all the way back to the palace. It was the longest twenty minutes of his life.

The rest of the Emperor's hangers-on held back, and Narcissus sensed that they were glad of the chance to leave the conversation to someone else. Caligula's mood

seemed good at the moment - almost too good, as he laughed raucously at his own jokes and commanded his guards to throw coins to the prettiest of the women they passed. But Narcissus knew that Caligula's moods were as changeable, and as deadly, as a maritime wind. One wrong word and he'd find himself wrecked on the rocks of Caesar's displeasure.

He tried to confine himself to yes or no answers, but he soon realised that even this was angering Caligula. The tenth time he smiled and agreed, the Emperor pouted and pulled away from him. "You're no fun," he said. "I thought you wanted to be my friend."

There was no possible reply to that. Narcissus bowed his head and hoped that would be enough.

It wasn't. "If I wanted silence," Caligula said, "I'd have cut out your tongue."

"I'm sorry, dominus," Narcissus whispered. But he could see that this only angered Caligula more. What did he want? Impertinence, perhaps, a witty retort - but it was far too great a risk.

"He's d-d-dazzled by you, nephew," a voice spoke up behind them.

Claudius, protecting him still. Narcissus was too ashamed to turn round and face him.

Their procession finally swept through the entrance to the palace, purple-painted marble pillars looming on either side. Caligula frowned at Narcissus in the sudden shade. "Are you? Dazzled by me, that is?"

"Yes, dominus." Narcissus said. And then, through a mouth numb with fear, "I've admired you so long from afar. To be suddenly so close to a living god is too much for a humble slave like myself."

"Well," Caligula said. "Understandable, I suppose. But disappointing. As you're such a hopeless conversationalist, I suppose I shall have to find another use for you."

"I live to serve," Narcissus said, and this time it seemed to be the right thing.

Caligula nodded. "Naturally. And I think I have just the job for you." There was a cruel twist to his lips as he spoke. "The importation records for the Empire are in a most desperate state. I had a slave looking over them, but her handwriting was just dreadful. So I cut it off. Her hand, that is. And then I couldn't have her bleeding all over the parchment, so since then there's been no one to sort it out."

"But dominus," Narcissus croaked. "I've no training in accounting. My master—" He caught Caligula's frown just in time. "My former master had me tutored in music, to play the lyre and the flute at his dinners."

"A musician - how wonderful! I play myself, you know. It's a career I could have pursued professionally, if I didn't have a higher obligation."

"The whole Empire speaks of your skill," Narcissus said.

Caligula eyed him coldly. His expression said that he knew he was being patronised, and Narcissus reminded himself that the Emperor wasn't stupid, just mad.

"That's as may be," Caligula said. "But as you can see, I need an accountant, not a flautist. You're a clever man - or so my uncle's always boasting. I'm sure you'll pick it up in no time. And if you don't..."

Caligula's eyes were already drifting away, searching the palace for some other entertainment. "But we don't need to worry about that, do we? I'm quite sure you won't disappoint me."



Petronius had thought he might be given some time to prepare himself. But once his father had made up his mind, he'd always been quick to put his plans into action. It was what made him so successful as a businessman. And it was the reason that, a mere half hour after he'd learned his fate, Petronius found himself at the door of the most tedious man in Rome.

Seneca looked at him sourly after his father had effected the introduction and then hurriedly left, presumably before Seneca could change his mind.

Petronius didn't know what the other man found so displeasing in his appearance. He'd often been told that he was a well-developed young man - and not just by the slaves - while Seneca himself was quite an unappealing sight. With his stringy, greying hair and gnarled limbs, he had the look of a man who'd suffered some debilitating illness as a child, and been slowly decaying into middle age ever since.

"So you're the young reprobate Anthony wants to palm off on me, are you?" he said, in a thin, reedy voice.

"I am Petronius son of Antonius of the Octavii, yes."

Seneca looked even less impressed. "Jumped-up plebeians, the lot of you."

Since this was exactly what Petronius himself had been thinking a short while ago, he elected not to respond.

"Well," Seneca said, "I suppose you'd better come in." He stood aside, ushering Petronius into the room beyond.

Dusk was beginning to fall over the city, but that didn't fully account for the gloom Petronius found within. Most Romans of Seneca's station filled their houses with light, a central atrium for greenery and direct sunlight, and windows elsewhere with bright painted plaster and mosaics for colour and life.

Not here. There were no windows in evidence, and the walls and floor were painted the same stark, gloomy red. The colour of dried blood, Petronius thought, and shivered. The whole place felt old, as if it was a relic from a more ancient city on whose bones Rome had been built.

Seneca led him through at a slow pace, slow enough for him to inspect the clutter of furniture and objects which filled every room. "You've spent time in Egypt?" Petronius said.

Seneca turned to stare at him, brown eyes bright and unfriendly. "Yes. How did you know?"

Petronius laughed. When that just made the other man frown, he gestured around him. A figurine of a cat sat on top of a wooden chest, half-decayed but still inscribed along its length with the little squares and pictures of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. A pile of papyrus teetered in one corner, while the other was taken up with the life-size statue of a cow-headed woman, a half-moon balanced on her crown.

"Yes, I see," Seneca said. "I'm surprised you recognise it."

"I have had some education."

"Little enough, your father tells me. But no matter. With me -" He gestured Petronius through to another room, its door half-hidden behind a thick blue cloth. "You may begin to study those things which really matter."

Here, at last, was a window. High in the far wall, it cast a wan light down on the stacks and stacks of scrolls which sat on every available surface. In the centre of it all

was a rickety wooden chair tucked beneath a small desk. The desk too was piled high. Seneca swept an impatient arm across it, pushing the scrolls onto the floor and a cloud of dust into the air.

"I did my own studies here, you know. This room made me the man I am."

"I can certainly believe that."

Seneca ignored - or perhaps didn't notice - his sarcasm. "Your first task will be to copy some of my more famous speeches. Many of my friends have been begging me for their own editions, and you'll learn a great deal in the process."

Petronius eased himself into the chair, sending up another cloud of dust from beneath his buttocks. "About what, precisely?"

"How to address your betters, for a start!" Seneca snapped. He rifled through one of the many piles of scrolls, pulling three out to hand to Petronius. They stank of mildew and old leather. "You may start with these. And I hope your hand is fair - if they're not readable, you'll simply have to start again."

The door slammed behind him as he left, the impact toppling one heap of paper to slide sibilantly to the floor. Petronius sighed and knelt to put them back in some kind of order. But his hand froze, hovering in mid air, when he saw that these too were covered in hieroglyphics.

Seneca had scoffed at him, at the idea that he might have attended to any of his education. And it was true that when the Greek slave his father had bought to tutor him had droned on about the history of the Roman republic, or the conquest of the barbarian tribes on its borders, he had closed his ears. But words, language, stories - these were things he cared passionately about. And when he cared, he applied himself. By the time he was thirteen, he could understand nearly every tongue spoken in the Empire.

He had never told his father, of course. If he'd known, the old man would have sent him off to manage a field office somewhere dreadful like Gaul and that would have been unbearable. A writer of Rome must live at its beating heart. So he'd kept the knowledge to himself, studying by the light of a candle after the rest of the household had retired to their beds.

He could speak all the languages of Rome. And he could read hieroglyphs, too.

He placed the fallen scroll on his desk and ran a finger along the first line, mentally translating it. 'And Osiris says, my hiding place is opened, it is opened. And the spirit falls into darkness, but I shall not die a second time in the land of eternal fire.'

He leaned back, rocking his chair on its legs. This was intriguing. Certainly far more interesting than Seneca's speeches. If he wasn't mistaken, those were lines from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. He'd tracked down a fragment once, in the shop of a shady Syrian who dealt in rare artefacts of questionable provenance.

Even those fragments had cost him a small fortune, gold coins he's pilfered from his father when he was too drunk to notice. The Syrian had claimed he was lucky to find anything at all. The Book of the Dead had been banned in Egypt two centuries ago, all the known copies burned.

So what exactly was Seneca doing in possession of one?

Vali took the bread and olives that Boda gave him without a word. But his red-brown eyes watched her the whole time he ate, thoughtful and assessing. She felt her

pulse quicken, though she wasn't quite sure why.

"How did you come here, clansman?" she asked, when the silence had stretched on too long.

"I'm a wanderer." He shrugged, as if that was explanation enough.

"You've wandered very far from home."

"The world is wide and my time short. I've travelled as far as I can."

"And who are your parents?" she asked. "Your cousins? Where is your people's hearth-home?"

His head tilted to one side as he quirked a crooked smile. "You don't trust me, clanswoman. You're right to be suspicious. This place is full of lies - but not mine."

He was speaking in riddles, like a bard. Could that be what he was? It might explain his presence here. The most famous storytellers among the Cimbri had been known to travel thousands of miles in search of a rare poem or a lost tale.

"You spoke of a secret hidden here," she said to him. "What did you mean?"

He finished the last of the bread before he answered, chewing each mouthful deliberately before washing it down with a mouthful of wine. His lips were stained dark red with it, and when his tongue flicked out to lick them clean it looked very pink in contrast. "There are secrets," he said. "But are you sure you want to know them? Ignorance is safer."

She thought about Josephus, dead by her sword because no one had told her the truth. "I don't care about safety. I want to know."

"Even if it might lead to your death?"

"Even then."

"Good." He smiled, as if she'd passed some sort of test, and his long legs uncurled from beneath him as he rose to his feet. A white litter of crumbs fell to the floor around him and she saw a small brown rat dart from beneath the table to seize them.

"It's through here," he said, moving quickly towards the back of the school, where the weapons and armour were stored between fights.

There were half a dozen other gladiators in the room and they all turned to stare as Boda walked past. Their gaze felt like a physical blow, filled with hostility. She wanted to tell them that she hadn't known Josephus was meant to live, that if they wanted to blame someone they should blame Quintus. But it was her sword that had been the instrument, and even by the laws of her own people the blood guilt was hers.

At the far door, Vali paused, his fingers brushing over the iron keyhole. "The key?" he said, and Boda saw that it was locked. That was new. Only last week she'd been in the place herself, trying out different helmets for the match in the Arena.

She shook her head. "Quintus must have it."

The other gladiators were still watching. If she tried to kick down the door, they'd stop her. She could already hear them murmuring, no doubt wondering why she was giving this beggar a tour of the place. It was probably only a matter of minutes before Quintus himself was summoned. Vali hadn't said so, but she was quite sure that the secret he spoke of concerned the old man.

"We don't have much time," she told him.

He looked skyward for a second, either praying or thinking. Then he shrugged, and turned the door handle.

The door swung open, creaking a little on its rusted hinges. He slipped through,

holding it open only a crack for her to follow. When he pushed it shut again, she heard a click that sounded like a lock turning.

She grabbed his arm. "How—"

He put his finger over her lips. His skin was dry, and hotter than she expected, as if he had a fever.

"There's not much time," he whispered. "You can ask your questions when I've shown you what you're here to see."

She could hear nothing except the gentle sound of her own breathing and the harsher rasp of Vali's. The sun had set outside, and the room's two windows were dark and blank. But there was a flicker of golden light, illuminating the neat racks of swords and the shelf after shelf of breastplates and helmets and greaves. The light seemed to be coming from behind them, in the far corner of the storeroom. Candles, she realised, smelling the honey-scented wax in the air. But why leave them burning in an empty room?

Vali nodded at her, as if he knew what she was thinking.

She crept forward, bare feet cold on the marble floor. Vali's footsteps slapped softly beside her. If there had been anyone else in the room, they would have heard him. But there wasn't. There was no one else living inside.

Josephus had been laid on a slab of stone at the far end, wedged into a corner beside a row of tridents. The candles were arranged around him, two of them already burned out and one guttering near extinction.

His body had been mutilated. Her sword had pierced his heart, but it had left a neat hole when she withdrew it. Now his chest had been cut open entirely, the ribs peeled back to emerge from the red flesh beneath like a row of jagged white teeth. She could smell rotting meat and shit combined, but there were no flies buzzing around this feast, though she could see them thick on the window above. It was as if something about the corpse repelled them.

Boda felt bile rise into her throat, acrid and burning, but she forced herself to move closer. She peered into the wide cavity of the chest, and saw that the wound in his heart had been repaired, the jagged edges sown together with small black stitches. The heart should have nestled between the two lobes of his lungs, but those were gone, nothing but a bloody vacancy in their place. The folds of the intestine were also missing and the great purple disc of his liver.

His face was mostly intact, but his nose was bloodied and broken. A thin white gruel dripped from one of his nostrils and Boda realised with a nauseous shock that it was what remained of his brains.

Set on each corner of the slab on which he lay were four earthenware jars. Up close, she could see that their lids were fashioned in the form of heads: man, monkey, fox and something that might have been a hawk. The smell of shit came most strongly from this last, and after a moment's hesitation, she lifted its lid.

Josephus's intestines lay coiled inside, like a slick brown serpent.

She dropped the lid, hardly noticing as it smashed on the floor beside her foot. Vali shifted beside her and she wrenched her eyes away from the corpse to look into his grave face.

The sound of the key turning in the lock was startlingly loud in the silence.

Boda spun to face the door. The rack of tridents was beside her, and she snatched