

CHAPTER ONE: GLOOMY IN ARELATE

In which our hero begins his quest.

humanius est deridere vitam quam deplorare

It is more human to laugh about life than to cry about it.

Seneca the Younger, *De tranquillitate animi*, III.8

23 APRIL 26 CE

During the reign of the Roman Emperor, Tiberius

Birthdays.

Lemme tell ya, I've had some bad fucking birthdays; take this year's entry: being chased by murderous goons sent by the Emperor's best palsy-walsy to snuff me out like Father, which really took the gods-damned cake.

Or the time Father had called me into his room to discuss that less than wholesome scroll I'd bought at the docks and thought I'd squirreled away so well. Or the time Uncle Aulus had hidden a fake spider under my pillow that made me shart through my sheets. Or that other time Mother had announced to Father at dinner that she was pregnant with his brother's child.

They'd sucked big, hairy camel balls. And here I'd thought last year's had been the worst. But this year's birthday? Might just claw its way to the number one spot.

I glanced over my shoulder again. Still no sign of the murderous pursuers I'd seen behind me an hour ago, when I'd hidden in a cold, wet ditch while they were sauntering by, while I shivered and wheezed like a silvered haired geezer. My luck was holding out. But for how long?

I shivered. *Merde.*¹

"What'd you say yer name was again, son?" asked the guard, a townie by his accent, standing in front of the city's imposing metal gate. He spat on the ground, looked up at me, smiled, and continued chewing on Jupiter-knew-what.

Sitting on my stolen mare under a relentless rain after a harrowing escape, I said a silent prayer to my patron goddess.

¹ *Merde.* = Shit. Though Americans would tend to say *damn* or *dammit*.

O Fortuna, goddess and protector of book-smart-alecks like me, this birthday boy could use a present, but would settle for a future.

“Gaius Publicius.”

“That some kind of joke?”

So imagine the most generic name, like one used to identify the unidentifiable body after a battle or fished up from a river? Well, in the Latin of Rome, Gaius Publicius was as close as you could get to John Doe. Hence his disbelief.

“No joke. I get that a lot.” I smiled. “Fifth Legion stationed here?” Cold raindrops slid under my neckline and raced down my back. I tried not to shiver again.

“Other side of the river.” His brow unfurled a bit. “What makes you ask?”

“They still taking volunteers?” A seventeen-year-old asthmatic like me who loved scrolls, the *last* place anyone would look for me was in the army. All that marching, shouting, and digging. Jupiter Almighty, *non, merci!*

“Suppose so.” He shuffled his feet a little.

“You served?” I saw

He drew himself up with pride.

“Sixth Ferrata. Stationed, served, retired here. Honorable discharge and pension. Been passing the time at this plum job ever since.”

“Tell you what, soldier: how about a *quid pro quo*? You let me in, I give you my horse.”

He arched an eyebrow, a furry caterpillar running uninterrupted across his brow.

“Go on,” he replied.

“I’ve got a few coins to spare a hard-working veteran. Must be rough working in such bad weather. What must they pay you? Criminal. Just criminal. Even with your pension...”

I paused for him to turn over my offer like his tongue was doing with the wad in his mouth.

The rain slowed down. Then stopped. We stood for a moment, relishing the sudden silence; I looked back and saw sunflowers rustling and waving a cheery welcome to no one in particular, heard the gentle burble of the Rhodanus river, felt the rustling breeze impatient to flee from the nearby fields, and breathed in the April air, fragrant with lavender and wildflowers and a heady hint of love. Even the tombstones along the side of the road basked in the balmy sunlight.

“Ain’t that bad mostly. Here, anyhow.” The guard cocked a knowing eyebrow and smiled. I smiled back. I dismounted and we shook hands. As I handed him a few coins, he pulled back a step, coughing and gagging.

Well, after a handful of sweet-smelling-but-dodgy-looking berries, followed by two days of fiery diarrhea on a wet horse, you’d’ve run away too. He opened the gate, and I said a fond farewell to my mare as he led her away, giving me a wide berth. I took a last look back and saw far off in the distance two figures mounted on horses emerging from the forest’s edge. I scurried through the gate to take in the city and heard the gate slam shut behind me.

Just inside, between the giant marble theater and arena, an old beggar woman singing a song of long-lost love gave me a playful wink as I passed by. I tossed a coin to her, saw it flip through the air, catch the exquisite early morning light and land squarely on her lap in the shade of a statue of Augustus, our elegant and much beloved emperor, who’d loved this town, lavishing his own wealth to make it a memorable city.

I missed Augustus. Our emperor now was the hateful, dour, and humorless Tiberius. Or as Father had called him, Emperor Gloom and Doom.

Speaking of gloom and doom, Mother’d’ve been proud I’d made it this far, having always told me that I had the sense of direction of a blind man. Despite Father’s death in Rome, my grueling journey here, and yet another big birthday debacle, I smiled.

As Uncle Aulus had always said, it was hard to be gloomy in Arelate.

I squinted from the sun and reached for my straw hat. Gone with my stolen mare. Or she’d eaten it last night. It was food to her, after all.

Food. My stomach gurgled. While riding on what had to be the bumpiest road in the whole gods-damned empire, I hadn’t eaten since the berries incident. Beckoned by the tantalizing aroma of crusty, crispy bread fresh from an oven, I hustled over to a nearby stall. The proprietor, having set up early, beamed genuine joy as only few can do.

“Nice haircut,” she joked. Yeah, well, I’d have to see a barber soon. I’d butchered my long locks in my haste to escape, and now it looked like drunken toddlers had groomed me.

“Thanks. I get that a lot. New barber.” I reached up, rubbed my prickly, scab-covered scalp, and winced. Maybe my new look would throw off my pursuers, the Praetorians, Emperor Tiberius’ hit squad and personal guard, whom I’d just spotted at the forest’s edge. Maybe they wouldn’t find their long-locked and bearded target now, much less the heirloom razor I’d

chucked into a field after the worst shave and haircut, bar none. I wished again for my lost straw hat I'd hand-weaved to cover my caca 'do. *C'est la vie.*²

I paid her, cracked open the warm crust, put the soft white sponginess up to my nose, and inhaled deeply. Pure bliss. The second one tasted even better. I ate, walked, and gawked and lost myself in the flow of the crowd as Arelate came to life with the arrival of the sun.

For nearly a mile down the main drag, women, slaves, priests, soldiers, and toga-clad politicians were emerging from homes, tittering and balking at merchants selling everything from cabbages to spices, brooms to bread, oysters and fish sauce and olive oil, and bright, colorful flowers, all aromatic.

Yeah, it was hard to be gloomy in Arelate. Tiberius must've never visited.

Off duty soldiers strolled behind me, ignoring the playful catcalls of a group of persistent prostitutes. Father had lectured me never to get involved with one. I remember the stern look in his eye as he so earnestly forbade me to do something that I would end up doing someday anyway. Parents. Someone should give them a manual.

I heard over the din of the morning crowd the metallic slam of the city gate. I turned around and saw the two Praetorians I'd spotted earlier leaving the forest, and I felt a hot twinge in my throat of panic and my throat closing up. *Great timing, asthma*, I thought. They were hot on my trail, so I tried to keep from passing out and sped up like my ass hairs were on fire. They followed my path, the red crests on their helmets resembling twin shark fins cutting through the water. My lungs burned with hunger for air, as my throat went on strike, refusing to allow access as icy claws wrapped around my brain. As I passed through the crowd, black dots were dancing ominously at the edge of my vision. If I didn't get to safety soon, I'd pass out and be a sitting duck. Or dead. I turned and saw the red crests only a few feet behind. In my hurry, my foot connected with a pole that supported a canopy over a merchant's stall, and the entire thing came down on the merchant's head and the Praetorians, giving me a moment to disappear.

I managed to circumvent the lively market crowd in the Forum and entered, judging by its made-to-impress exterior, the city center of Roman law, Arelate's basilica. The inside felt pleasant and cool, probably the ritzy marble on the floor, ceiling, and wall to wall. Augustus,

² *C'est la vie* = *That's life*. A common expression on par with "this will pass."

*bien sûr*³; such impeccable taste. The dots faded, and my throat started to ease its tyrannical grip and my wheezing slowed as I leaned on the counter.

I scanned the room and saw a bunch of slaves holding up the walls. They gaped at me, their hands clutching parchments and wax tablets, gawking like I'd been caught fingering our eighty year old empress. A clerk behind the counter cleared his throat. I caught a glimpse of the red-crested Praetorians, their bronze shields shining in the sun, approaching the basilica's entrance. I sent up another silent prayer.

O Fortuna, fickle goddess of fate, don't fail me now.

"What?" asked the clerk.

"I'm here...to enlist," I replied, hoping to sound confident and taller and less wheezy.

He sighed, then pointed to a staircase. I grinned, nodded my thanks, and shot upstairs just as the Praetorians walked past the entrance. By the time I'd reached the top, I could breathe more easily. I took a long, cautious, and exhilarating breath. *Voilà*.⁴

In the well-lit room at the top, I found a wiry, bearded Greek with a receding hairline sitting at a tidy little desk. He was dictating to a cluster of several harried-looking soldiers, whose eyes jumped from their wax tablets to land on me. He must've heard me or perhaps caught my scent. Maybe both. *Allons-y!*⁵

"You there!" he snapped. "What's your business here?" Impeccable Latin with a hoarse southern Greek twang. And like all Spartans, he sounded like he was used to getting his way. I drew myself up to seem more impressive. It wasn't much, despite Father's towering stature. I watched his nose crinkle as my odor hit him. The cluster parted, taking a few steps backwards, pulling wax tablets to their chests.

"Here to enlist." I hoped he'd bought my accent, a bit rough around the edges, vaguely southern Gaul, AKA Mother's accent. He frowned. *Merde!*⁶

"As what? A horse? Or practice dummy?" One soldier stifled a laugh.

As that arse-licking poet Vergil had put it, Fortuna favors the brave. I stormed over, grabbed the tablet out of his grasp, and watched his surprise. Well, desperate times called for desperate measures, and I'd never been more desperate in my life. Or smellier.

³ *Bien sûr* = Of course

⁴ *Voilà* = *There it is, literally. Used here to mean something that wasn't going well, but now is going well.*

⁵ *Allons-y!* = Let's go! Literally, let's go *there* (*there* being to some unspecified destination)!

⁶ *Merde!* = Shit! Though Americans would tend to say *damn* or *dammit*.

“I’m not sure you heard me correctly,” I stated. I heard a nearby soldier suck air up his nostrils in anticipation of the worst.

“I heard you fine,” he hissed at me through clenched teeth. “Now hand me that tablet at once.”

He stood and made a grab for it, so I pulled back. The soldiers drew their swords. He shook his head and waved them away. They saluted and scattered to the eight winds. I put the wax tablet back without a word. He took it, never taking his eyes off of me, and sat.

“You? In the army? You’re joking. A future scroll-shuffler like you? Are you even fifteen?” He pointed to my poorly shaved head. “Your hair looks like a barber caught you in bed with his wife with all that mess. You reek like Cerberus’ asshole. And you want to join the army?” He snorted. “Not even if Aphrodite herself came down in her chariot of swans, did the dance of seven veils, and sat on my face. Out.” He pointed to the door.

I reached under my belt and dropped a sack of money onto his desk with a plunk, nearly all that remained of my purse for a never-to-happen-now birthday trip to Rome. Oh well, Mother hadn’t wanted me to go anyhow. Seems she had gotten her way yet again. He looked at me for a moment then back at the bag, grunted in what I assumed was acceptance, and took a peek inside before dropping it into a drawer.

“Sure you want to do this?” His tone was deadly serious. “There’s less dangerous professions. Why the army? Why not just run away with this fortune?” He tapped on the drawer containing my purse.

“*Pas possible, chef*.⁷ I need to hide somewhere no one would ever look for me. *Donc, me voici*.⁸ You leaving soon and for far, far away?” I hoped I hadn’t overplayed my hand.

“Well, you’ve got balls, I’ll give you that.” He nodded to the seat next to me. I sat. He put the tablet aside and pulled out a new one. “I’m Marcus Crixus, prefect for the Fifth Legion. That means I’m in charge of all logistics, and the second highest ranking officer around here. A flea doesn’t fart around here without me knowing about it, understand? Tell you what: I have a terrible fucking mess to clean up. You want in the army, no questions asked? *Quid pro quo*, soldier. You in?”

“I’m in.”

⁷ *Pas possible, chef* = Not possible, boss.

⁸ *Donc, me voici* = Therefore/And so/Hence, here I am.

He opened a blank tablet and took a stylus to carve into the wax.

“Name?”

“Uhhh...”

Panic seized me. Fucking fuckery! I’d forgotten my new name.

“Are you hourly?” Crixus repeated. “Name?”

My brain spun like a drunken shot-putter. Sunlight peeked through the window, shining around his silhouette onto the tidy desk.

“Gaius Publicius.”

“Original. Next, when and where were you born?”

“Near Narbo. Twenty-third of April. I’m seventeen today.” Narbo was far enough west he might not recognize the accent.

“Happy birthday. Know how to fight?” he asked.

“Thanks. My Father and Uncle taught me the basics. I’m better with words.”

“*Quelle surprise*.⁹ Your father know you’re here?”

“I’m old enough. Don’t need his permission anymore. What’s this mess you mentioned?”

“I’ve seen more whiskers on an oyster, but it’s your money, Publicius. First, I need someone to help solve a murder.”

My heart leapt up in my mouth with joy.

“*Me voici!*”¹⁰ I’m your man,” I replied, hooting and hollering inside. “My father was a brilliant lawyer and almost never lost a case. I grew up at his knee, learning about his work solving cases.”

My internal cheering stopped as the thought of Father loomed over me. I bit my bottom lip to keep my voice from shaking and my hot tears from escaping. Those times with Father, and sometimes Uncle Aulus, discussing his cases had been the best times we’d shared. My chest ached with lingering pangs of regret and sorrow. I bit my lip again and found the pain helpful to avoid falling into a well of grief.

“That so? Your old man taught you?”

“Sure did. It’d be an honor to keep up the family tradition,” I said. *If not the family name*, I thought.

⁹ *Quelle surprise* = what a surprise. Used sarcastically here without an exclamation point. Obviously.

¹⁰ *Me voici* = Here I am/You’ve found me

“Well, I could use someone like that. We need someone who can talk to *la crème de la crème*¹¹ of Arelate. Afterwards, though? What else can you do? Any special talents?”

“I’m a fast reader and I’ve got a good ear,” I replied. “*Vous êtes de Sparte, non?*¹²”

“*Oui, bien sûr.*¹³ So you speak Greek. Whoopee. Who doesn’t? No, I need someone with a good knowledge of Frisian. *You* don’t speak Frisian, do you?”

My heart jumped again. *Lady Luck loves me today*, I thought.

“Sure do,” I answered. “Seems I’m your man again.”

Mother had invited her Frisian cousin to our home a few years back, and I’d worn him down until he taught me. They spoke Frisian way up north in a part Caesar had called the wildest. And not the fun kind of wild with wine and song. *Au contraire, Pierre*¹⁴. They were more the drink-wine-out-of-your-skull wild. Well, I’d asked for far, far away.

Crixus set down his stylus.

“My lucky day. Since good sleuths and translators are worth their weight in gold, you’re a bargain. Now, to my problem. It won’t be easy.”

“I didn’t ask for something easy. I asked for something leaving soon and preferably far from here.”

“It won’t be easy, as we leave in just under five days. And, as you may have guessed, we are headed north to Lower Germany, the very arse-end of Rome’s boundaries, into Frisian territory. Far enough, Publicius?”

“Yeah. Think so.”

“You will be working on the case with two other soldiers. You and your team will report to me at least once a day. With me so far?”

“Yup.” I said. Then I thought, *so a team, eh?*

“I report to one person, General Lucius Apronius, the head honcho of the Fifth Legion.”

“Apronius, huh? Pretty posh credentials.”

I’d heard of Apronius: a career soldier with victories in Dalmatia and Africa, even foiling an assassination attempt against Emperor Tiberius. *Quel*¹⁵ big shot!

“Indeed, Publicius, as he is often fond of reminding me.”

¹¹ *La crème de la crème* = English: The cream of the crop, Lit. the cream of the cream.

¹² *Vous êtes de Sparte, non?* = You’re from Sparta, aren’t you?

¹³ *Oui, bien sûr* = Yes, of course (just as impatient as it sounds)

¹⁴ *Au contraire, Pierre* = English: No way, Jay! Lit: on the contrary, Peter (which doesn’t rhyme)

¹⁵ *Quel* = What a ...! Can be used positively or negatively; here, it’s anyone’s guess. Both?

“What about this murder? Care to spill any tasty beans?”

“First? Go bathe. You smell gods-awful. I’ll tell you about the mess after. It’s a doozy.”

“No spoiling it?”

“Oh, fine. Just sit a little farther back. I’ll call in the team. Orsus! Felix! Get in here.”

Two soldiers hustled in and snapped to attention. One, tall and muscular, blond and steely blue eyes, had pale skin covered with blue Celtic tattoos. The second had black skin, a shaved head, and kind eyes to match his easy smile; shorter than the first, but burlier. They stood rigidly at attention.

“Gaius Publicius, this is Watch Captain Orsus,” said Crixus, and the blond hulk nodded. “He’s been instrumental in resolving similar issues here at camp. If he solves this case, he’s sure to get his promotion to *optio*. Better pay and benefits, isn’t that so, Orsus?”

“Yes, sir.” Orsus stared ahead. *Quite an accent, I thought, from way, way up north, far past where we were headed, and therefore hard to pin down.*

“And his companion here is Felix. Currently he’s with the torture squad, but it hasn’t been a good fit. This can be your ticket out and into the medics’ squad. You up for this, Felix?”

“Quite ready indeed, sir.” *Italian accent, I thought, definitely southern Italian. Perhaps around Neapolis? Pompeii? Herculaneum?*

“And this would-be stable hand is Gaius Publicius, boys,” Crixus said to them. “He knows Frisian and how to solve crimes. He also knows how to talk all posh, so use him to question the civvies.”

“Civvies, sir?” I asked.

“Civilians, kid,” answered Orsus. *Yeah, I cannot place his accent, I thought glumly.*

“Exactly. Now that you’re all here, here’s the problem. Our Frisian translator and your predecessor, Publicius, was murdered last night at a dinner party.”

“Flevo, sir?” Orsus asked, “Who’d wanna kill Flevo, sir?”

“Nicest guy ever, Flevo, sir,” Felix agreed.

“Flevo? Just Flevo Flevo?” I asked.

“Publicius,” Crixus warned, “I’ve put up with it until now, son, but if you don’t start fucking punctuating and peppering your phrases with the word *sir* from now on when speaking to a superior officer, I’ll have Felix here demonstrate what he’s learned in the torture unit. Understood?”

I heard Orsus chuckle. Felix elbowed him; Orsus stopped. I swallowed hard.

“Sir, yes, sir. Understood, sir,” I replied. “Sir, so who was Flevo, sir?”

“Flevo,” Crixus continued, “was also the cousin of the bigwig Frisian Ambassador Cruptorix, here in Arelate on an important diplomatic mission to negotiate taxes for his people with General Apronius, who’s acting as Rome’s agent in this affair. They were invited to a private reception, and after dinner, Flevo was found strangled in the garden. Questions?”

“What were the negotiations over, sir?” I asked. “If you don’t mind, sir.”

“No state secret, Publicius. They discussed the upcoming forms of taxes the Frisians will pay. Ox hides, if I recall correctly. So a negotiation, of sorts. The rest you will have to get from the witnesses.”

“Any suspects, sir?” I asked.

His pause made my stomach churn. *Merde*.¹⁶

“Only one, but it’s circumstantial. The rest claim to have been together watching a scene from a play put on by a local theater troupe. A fairly iron-clad alibi.”

Well, double *merde*¹⁷, I thought.

“What were the circumstances, sir?” Felix chimed in.

“Our one suspect, Lucius Calvinus, is a filthy rich playboy whose family built this town. Slippery as an oiled up eel. He was with Flevo alone for a while during the actors’ scene. Calvinus returned alone, and later on Flevo’s body was found dead in the garden where they’d been.”

“And where we’ll take you later, Publicius,” added Orsus.

“Seems dodgy for an alibi, sir, wouldn’t you say? So what kind of a person was Flevo, sirs? If you all knew him.”

Crixus shrugged.

“I never worked with him,” said Crixus.

“I think I heard him say ten words to me in all the time I knew him,” said Felix. “But no one talked bad about him, ever.”

“Not a big party-goer. Bit of a loner. Quiet guy,” said Orsus. “Sad, sometimes.”

“Who would want to kill him, sir?” I asked. “One of the guests? Staff?”

¹⁶ *Merde*. = Shit. Though Americans would tend to say *damn* or *dammit*.

¹⁷ *Merde*. = Shit. Though Americans would tend to say *damn* or *dammit*. *Merde*, look above this line!

“No idea. That’s your job to find out. If you want to get to know him, you can talk to his tent mates since you’ll be lodging with them. They knew him, I’d imagine.”

“Putting Publicius with the Balearic Boys, sir?” Orsus asked.

“Unless you have a better place, Watch Captain?”

“No, sir. He can ask them.” Orsus said.

*Magnifique!*¹⁸ I thought. Balearic islanders were notorious for being nude all the time...and wicked talented slingers. The story went that Balearic children had to kill something with their sling and bring it home to their mother if they wanted to eat. The nudity? Anyone’s guess.

“Who found the body, sir?” I asked, ticking off my internal boxes: who, when, what, where, how...and why.

“One of the actors from the after-dinner show. As they were leaving, one of them tripped over his body in the garden,” replied Felix. “We’ll be examining the body next at the local ice merchant in the subterranean level under the Forum.”

“The cryptoporticus?” Crixus asked. Felix nodded.

I shuddered, thinking about seeing yet another dead body.

“How about the suspect, sirs? What’s his alibi?”

“We haven’t had access to Calvinus yet,” Crixus answered, “but I’d imagine he’ll claim that Flevo was alive when he left him. The fly in our wine cup is a certain Captain Julius Burdo, head of the Arelate City Watch, who had been protecting him, and talking to Captain Burdo is like squatting down on a cactus garden. Resents the army being here. Says we cause too much trouble, and wouldn’t let us question the suspect without him. This Captain Burdo mistakenly tried to assert jurisdiction; so, this morning, General Apronius posted a guard at the suspect’s house to remind Captain Burdo that Flevo’s murder is clearly a matter for the army to resolve, and not the City Watch. At the same time, we would prefer not to have a pissing contest that could delay things, so be diplomatic around Captain Burdo. Understand?” Crixus directed his last question at Orsus.

“Understood, sir,” Orsus replied.

And yet I was betting this Captain Burdo character didn’t see things our way.

“Who else was at dinner, sir?” I asked.

¹⁸ *Magnifique!* = Wonderful! Magnificent! Here it is used sarcastically, since that works better in French.

“Most of the town’s hoity-est-toity-est citizens and some rich bastards from Rome. Felix has the list of attendees. You can go over it and see me if you have questions, not that I will be of much help with the wealthy power brokers of Rome and Arelate.”

“Will do, sir,” Felix replied, nodding.

Oh, hur-*rah*! This case was already smelling worse than a kettle of week-old fish left in the summer sun. And maybe even me.

“Gotcha. What can you tell me about the actors, sir?”

“Local company, run by a fellow Greek named Philostrates. They aren’t looking to testify.”

“Can’t say I blame them, sir, as testifying against the aristocracy would be fatal for business.”

“That supposed to be a pun?”

“Sorry, sir. Old habit. What about the staff?”

“They’re being questioned by Felix’s pals in the torture squad,” Orsus said.

“As per Roman law, I take it, sirs?” The law was that the testimony of slaves was only valid if obtained during torture.

“As per Roman law,” Crixus answered. “You can question them as well. Any other questions?”

“Any motive, sir?” I had the means and a window of opportunity. Time for the third part of every investigation, just as Father and Uncle Aulus had drilled into my head. I found motive the most telling and thrilling and chilling of the three: *what moves a person to commit murder?*

“Political, maybe,” Crixus said. “His cousin’s the Frisian Ambassador, after all. Some insurgent looking to sow discord? Who knows? I’m no sleuth.”

“That’s why this needs to be solved so quickly, right, sir? To avoid an embarrassing scandal? Don’t want Ambassador Cruptorix to go back home and stir up the natives before General Apronius has a chance to arrive, do we, sir?”

“That and preventing an incident here, even before we arrive up north. That would not be a great start, Publicius.”

“What do you mean, *an incident*, sir? What sort of incident?” I felt old Crixus was holding out on me. He frowned again.

“Mutiny. The troops are furious over Flevo’s murder. They’ve taken it poorly, and Captain Burdo’s unhelpful attitude hasn’t helped settle anything down. Our Watch Captain Orsus here has done an excellent job keeping them calm, but this case is the priority.”

“So you’re telling me that a bunch of hardened soldiers are upset about one soldier’s death? I mean, isn’t that what happens to soldiers, sirs?” I asked.

“Not if you’re good,” quipped Orsus.

“Flevo was special. You’ll see.” Crixus replied.

Then I saw his nostrils flare. Oh, right. I *stunk*.

“Go. Bathe. Now. I’ll have your uniform sent to the baths. Consider it a birthday present. Orsus, Felix, show him the way out, please.” He turned back to his tablet, inscribing the last scribbles into the wax, his eyes focused, as though we weren’t there.

“One last question, sir?” I asked, feeling the disapproval radiating off of Felix and Orsus for my brash disobedience.

“What?” Crixus didn’t look up.

“What do you get out of this, sir?” I asked. “What’s your *quid* for our *quo*?”

Crixus looked up, cleared his throat, and stared through me again.

“You mean other than the satisfaction of seeing Justice served and stopping a murderer?”

“Spare me, sir. Cynicism runs in my veins.”

“Fine. If you solve this case, I stand a better chance of having General Apronius choose me to be the governor of Lower Germany when we arrive, instead of Centurion Olennius, who, despite all his worst qualities, has ingratiated himself to General Apronius like a barnacle on a ship. He’ll try to solve the case before us, so you need to solve it first. Understood?”

“Understood, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Fine, fine. Dismissed. Go solve your case, boys. Report to me later.”

We responded with a chorus of “*sir!*” I stood up, saluted, and we exited. While walking down the stairs, I thought I heard the clanging sounds of my bribe tumbling all over his desk.

Strolling out the building, I saw on the far east side of the Forum the two Praetorians hellbent on heading our way. I froze before realizing how conspicuous I looked. Again the icy prickles threatened my breathing.

“Which way down, sirs?” I stammered. “First time here.”

Orsus nodded to a building to the west, away from the approaching Praetorians. The western building, proud and noisy, ringed with tidy columns, gleamed in the late morning sunlight and beckoned us forward.

Yeah, it was hard to be gloomy in Arelate, after all. Uncle Aulus had been spot on.

As we shuffled away, I looked up and for a hot, fearful moment, I imagined the red-crested Praetorians towering over me, turning me around slowly, saying my name, and hauling me off to be tried, condemned, and executed. Instead, they headed south. I hustled into the western building, staying behind Orsus and Felix, saying a silent thanks as we headed down into the cryptoporticus beneath the Forum.

Hail, Fortuna, gracious guardian against constant close calls.