

Prologue

Mesopotamia, North of the City of Carrhae, spring AD260

The emperor blinked as he stepped out into the bright sunshine. He seemed to wince as the court official called out his full title in Latin. ‘Imperator Caesar Publius Licinius Valerianus Augustus, *Pius Felix, Pater Patriae, Germanicus Maximus, Invictus, Restitutor Orbis*’. At a sign, a horse was led forward. Its bridle shone with silver and gold, and its trappings were imperial purple. Needing no prompting, the elderly emperor walked to where the horse waited. As so many times before in the last few days, he got down on one knee, then the other. With a momentary pause, which might be excused in someone his age, he got down on all fours, his elbows in the dust. What seemed an age passed. The horse shifted and exhaled through its lips, the noise loud in the quiet camp. The sun was hot on the emperor’s back.

The sound of another man walking towards the horse broke the near-silence. Out of the corner of his eye, the emperor could see two purple boots. Deliberately, the left one was raised and placed on his neck. As many times before, its owner let some of his weight come down through the boot before he spoke.

‘This is the truth, not what the Romans depict in their sculptures and paintings,’ he declared, then swung himself into the saddle, his weight hard upon his imperial mounting block. ‘I am the Mazda-worshipping divine Shapur, King of Kings of Aryans and non-Aryans, of the race of the gods, son of the Mazda-worshipping divine Ardashir, King of Kings of the Aryans, of the race of the gods, grandson of the King Papak, of the house of Sasan; I am the lord of the Aryan nation. You may look on my works and tremble.’

Ballista, the Roman general from beyond the borders in the far north, lay full length in the dust and watched. His reluctant *proskynesis*, or posture of adoration, was enforced by guards and the threat of a beating or worse and echoed by the rest of the Roman high command. Successianus the Praetorian Prefect, Cledonius the *ab Admissionibus*, Camillus the commander of Legio VI Gallicana – everyone of importance who had been with the field army – they were all there. The world had been turned upside down, the whole cosmos was shaken. For the first time, a Roman emperor had been captured by the barbarians. Ballista could feel the outrage and horror of his *commilitiones* as they were forced to witness the humiliation of Valerian – the pious, lucky, invincible emperor of the Romans, the restorer of the world – on his knees and dressed as a slave.

Four days earlier, Valerian had been captured. He had been betrayed by the companion he most trusted, the *Comes Sacrarum Largitionum* Macrianus the Lambe. The Count of the Sacred Largess had arranged everything. His younger son, Quietus, had led the aged emperor and his army into a trap and then abandoned them.

Ballista, belly to the ground, furious in his abasement, thought of the repulsive youth Quietus, by now safely back in the Roman city of Samosata, and he repeated to himself a vow he had made twice before: *One day, maybe not soon, but one day, I will kill you.*

Shapur caracoled his mount, its hooves plunging and stamping dangerously close to the elderly man on the ground. Then the Sassanid King of Kings paced his horse along the line of his own courtiers, noblemen and priests and rode away, laughing.

Slowly, heavily, Valerian began to get to his feet. The butts of spears, freely wielded, encouraged the *Comites Augusti* to do the same.

As he hauled himself up, Ballista looked at the Sassanid courtiers. There, prominent among the priests, was the Persian youth whom Ballista had known as Bagoas when the boy had been his slave. How the wheel of fortune turns. Was the youth smiling at him behind that black beard?

The sight of Bagoas turned Ballista's thoughts to his *familia*.

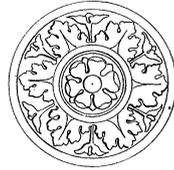
Had his ex-slaves Calgacus, Maximus and Demetrius made it to safety? Were they now also safe in Samosata? Or were they already on the road to Antioch? Antioch, where Ballista's two young sons and wife waited, all unaware. The pain of thinking of them was almost unbearable. Ballista spoke in his heart to the high god of his northern youth: *Allfather, Death-blinder, Deep Hood, Fulfiller of Desire, Woden-born as I am, hear my prayer: I will give whatever is necessary, do whatever it takes, but let me return to them – return to them whatever the cost.*



PART ONE

Captivus

(The East, Spring–Summer AD260)



‘What is it like to lose one’s native land? Is it a grievous loss?’

Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 387–8

I

Maximus lay motionless watching the Persians. They were in front of and below him, towards the middle of the small upland meadow where three paths came together. They were not above forty paces away. He could see them clearly: in the pale moonlight, men and horses were solid, dark-grey silhouettes. There were twenty-one Sassanid cavalymen. Maximus had counted them several times.

The Sassanids were confident. They had dismounted and were talking quietly. They were unavoidably in the way. Maximus raised his eyes to check the position of the sickle-shaped, three-night-old moon. There was not much of the night left. With northern Mesopotamia overrun with Persian patrols, Maximus and the others had to be safe behind the walls of Zeugma by dawn. There was no time to retrace their steps or to cast about for another path which ran east–west through the high country. If the Persians did not move on within half an hour, the Romans would have to try and fight their way through. It did not promise well. They were outnumbered three to one. Demetrius had never been much of a one in a fight, and old Calgacus was wounded. Sure, but it did not promise well at all.

Moving slowly, hardly moving his head a fraction, Maximus looked over at Calgacus. The old Caledonian was lying on his left

side, favouring his bandaged right arm. His great domed, balding skull blended well with the white rocks. Maximus was fond of Calgacus. They had been together a long time – nineteen years, since Maximus had been bought in as a slave bodyguard to the *familia* of Ballista. Of course, Calgacus had been with Ballista since the latter's childhood among the Angles of Germania. Calgacus was a sound man. Maximus was fond of him, although not as fond as he would be of a good hunting dog.

Maximus studied his companion, the dark lines of his wrinkled forehead and the black pools of his sunken cheeks. Truth be told, Maximus was worried. Sure, Calgacus was tough. But he had seemed old nearly twenty years before. Now he was wounded, and the last four days must have taken it out of the old bastard.

Four days earlier, they had watched Ballista ride out from the trapped army, one of the five *comites* accompanying the emperor Valerian to his ill-fated meeting with the Sassanid King of Kings Shapur. They had done what their *patronus* Ballista had commanded. As the imperial party rode west, they had crossed the perimeter to the south and doubled back behind the eastern slope of the hill. The small group of horsemen – Maximus, Calgacus and Demetrius, Ballista's Greek secretary, along with eight Dalmatian troopers – had made no great distance north when they were challenged by a Sassanid picket. Maximus, the only one who could speak Persian, had shouted out the password, which Ballista had discovered from Quietus, the traitor who had led the Roman army into the trap: *Peroz-Shapur*.

The Sassanids were suspicious. They had been told to let through only one party of Roman horsemen heading north and shouting, 'The victory of Shapur', and one had already passed. Yet they drew back, their dark eyes scowling, their hands on their weapons.

Maximus and the others had ridden on. Not too fast, so as not to look as if they were fleeing; not too slowly as to appear to be flaunting themselves. Against every instinct for self-preservation, they kept to a gentle canter.

Behind them, a lone rider, baggy clothes flapping, horse kicking up puffs of dust, had raced across the plain. He spurred up to the Persian picket. There was gesticulating, shouting. The easterners kicked their boots into the flanks of their horses. They gave tongue to a high, ululating cry. The chase was on.

Pushing hard, Maximus and the others had galloped out of the valley of tears. They did not see Valerian, Ballista and the other *comites* hauled from their mounts and, dusty and bloodied, hustled away into captivity. They had no time to spare a glance for the remainder of the Roman field army of the east, surrounded and hopeless on the hill. They had a large party of Sassanid light cavalry only just over two bowshots behind them. They rode hard to the hills of the north-west.

Darkness had saved them. It seemed an eon coming, then all at once it was there. A dark, dark night; the night before the new moon. Calgacus, whom Ballista had chosen to be in charge, had ordered them to double-back to the south-east. After a time, he had found a place for them to lie up. The land here was rolling hills, sometimes bunching into mountains. On the flank of one of these lay a hollow, deep and wide enough to hide eleven men and horses. There was a small stream nearby. As he rubbed down Pale Horse, the mount that Ballista had entrusted to him, Maximus approved of the Caledonian's choice. His hands working hard, he tried not to think about the grey gelding's owner; once *his* owner, now his *patronus*, the friend he had left behind.

Maximus had been woken the following morning by the sound of goat bells. Despite the many years since he had been taken as a slave out of his native Hibernia and brought to the southlands, goat bells somehow still sounded exotic. Although alien, they were usually reassuring, speaking of a gentle, timeless Mediterranean order. That morning, they had not been. They were drawing closer.

Looking round, Maximus saw that everyone other than old Calgacus was still asleep. The Caledonian was stretched out on the ground peering over the lip of their hiding place. Maximus had

scrambled up next to him and risked a quick look over the top. It was a small flock, no more than twenty head, strung out behind a lead animal. They were coming to the stream to drink. The purposeful tread of the leader would take them right by the hollow, would give the goatherd a perfect view of the fugitives.

Maximus had been surprised when Calgacus gestured for him to go to the far end of the hollow. The goats were close, the tinkling of their bells loud. As Maximus moved past, two or three of the Dalmatians stirred. He motioned them to silence. In position now, he looked back at Calgacus.

Unhurriedly, Calgacus rose to his feet and stepped up over the lip of the hollow. He stood still, hands empty by his sides.

Pulling himself up, Maximus peeked over the top. Through the legs of the animals, he saw the goatherd. He was an elderly man with a huge beard and the air of a patriarch. He was leaning on a staff, calmly regarding Calgacus. The goatherd's untroubled manner suggested that ugly old Caledonians or even daemons popped up out of every other gully he passed.

'Good day, grandfather,' said Calgacus.

For a time the goatherd did not respond. Maximus had begun to wonder if he did not speak Greek. He was wearing baggy eastern-style trousers, but then, everyone in Mesopotamia did.

'Good day, my child,' the local replied at last. Maximus felt an urge to laugh building inside him.

'Is it safe to be out with the goats with the Sassanids all around?'

The goatherd considered Calgacus's question, weighing it up. 'I keep to the higher hills. The goats must drink. If the Persians see me, they may not kill me. What can you do?'

The local had his back almost completely to Maximus. Now the latter saw the point of Calgacus's silent instruction. Quietly, he stood. As Calgacus glanced over, he touched the hilt of his sword. There was a pause before the Caledonian gave a tiny shake of his head.

'May the gods hold their hands over you, grandfather,' said Calgacus.

With due deliberation, the goatherd turned his patriarchal gaze first on Maximus then back to Calgacus. 'I think they may do already.'

The staff tapped the lead goat on the rump. The herder turned to go. Above the swelling tinkle of bells, he called back, 'May the gods hold their hands over you, my children.'

Maximus stepped over to Calgacus. 'If they catch him, the reptiles will torture him. Not many men could keep a secret under that.'

The old Caledonian shrugged. 'What can you do?'

Maximus laughed. 'How true, *my child*, how true.'

'Shut the fuck up, and take the next watch,' replied Calgacus affably.

They had saddled up at dusk. With the true night came thousands of stars and the thinnest of thin new moons. According to the ways of his people, Maximus made a wish on the new moon, a wish he could never divulge, for certain to do so would spoil its purpose.

Calgacus had led them to the north-west. With two riders out in front, they took it easy. There could not be many miles to the Euphrates. Unless the Sassanids intervened, they would be in Samosata well before dawn.

They had been travelling for some hours, their hopes rising, when, as the malignant gods willed it, the intervention came. A Persian challenge, loud in the night. A cry of alarm, then further shouts in an eastern-sounding language. Calgacus circled his arm, wheeling the tiny column; everyone booted their horses. All around was the rattle of hooves, the ringing of equipment and, from behind, the roar of pursuit.

Maximus had sensed as much as seen the solid black line of an arrow as it shot past him, accelerating ahead into the night. A second later, he had heard the *wisp* of an arrow's passing. Momentarily, he wondered if it was another unseen arrow or the sound of the first. Shrugging this germ of a huge idea out of his mind,

he slung his shield over his back. As he rode, it banged painfully into his neck and back. At this short range, an arrow would probably punch clean through its linden boards, but somehow its weight and discomfort made him feel a little better.

They galloped on, over the pale, rolling hills, round dark, up-thrust mountains, past gloomy vineyards and orchards, through burnt hamlets and by abandoned farms. They crashed through small, upland streams; their beds stony, the water no more than hoof-high.

It is hard to outride men in fear for their lives. The clamour of pursuit had dropped back, faded to inaudibility beneath the sounds of their own movement. One more rise, and Calgacus signalled a halt. All the men dropped to the ground, taking the weight from their horses' backs.

Maximus looked round, counting. There were too few men in the pale light, just seven of them. Four of the Dalmatian troopers were gone. Had they been killed? Had they been taken? Or had they chosen a different path, either heroically, to lead the Sassanids away, or out of ignorance and terror? Neither Maximus nor anyone else in the party would ever know. They had vanished in the night.

Calgacus had handed his reins to the Greek boy Demetrius and was walking back to the brow of the hill. Hurriedly, Maximus did the same. Keeping low, they gazed back the way they had come.

The Sassanids had not given up. Not much above half a mile to the north, strung out at no great interval, torches flared across the hills.

'Persistent fuckers,' said Maximus.

'Aye,' agreed Calgacus. 'Having lost sight of us, they have thrown out a cordon to sweep the country.'

In silence the two men watched the easterners ride over the hills towards them. The undulating line of torches resembled a great snake coiling sideways, a huge mythical *draco*.

'If they want to stay in touch with each other, they will have go slowly,' said Maximus. 'It will be fine for us.'

‘Maybe,’ said Calgacus, ‘but if they get close we will try the trick Ballista used the time we were chased before the siege of Arete.’

Memories jumbled into Maximus’s thoughts: waiting in a stand of trees down by the river, the smell of mud, a scatter of stones, a desperate fight in a gully.

‘When Romulus died,’ said Calgacus patiently.

Maximus was grateful for the hint. Although the Hibernian had a high opinion of himself, it did not run to priding himself on his powers of recall. On that occasion, Ballista had tied a lantern to a packhorse. His standard bearer Romulus was to lead the Persians away while the rest of Ballista’s men rode to safety. After a time, Romulus was to turn the packhorse loose and make his escape, but something had gone wrong. He must have left it too late. Antigonus had come across Romulus a few days later – or what was left of him – staked out and mutilated. It had not ended well for Antigonus either: not long afterwards, a stone shot by a siege engine had taken his head off. Now, Maximus felt a rush of pity for his companions who had been lost along the way. He steadied himself. As he had sometimes heard Ballista say: *Men die in war. It happens.*

The seven remaining horsemen had pushed south. They rode hard, but not flat out. The stars wheeled and the moon tracked across the sky. There was no need for dangerous tricks with lanterns. Gradually, the lights of the Sassanids had fallen behind. After a time they could be seen no more.

Calgacus had kept them moving, when they could, avoiding the skyline, always aiming south-west. When dawn’s rosy fingers showed in the sky, the elderly Caledonian had begun to hunt for a place to lie up. Eventually, when the sun was almost up, he turned aside into an olive grove which ran up the flank of a hill. They had dismounted and pushed through straggly vines and up under the trees.

The dappled sunlight was warm on Maximus’s face when Calgacus shook him awake. Unnecessarily, the Caledonian had put his finger to his lips. Silently, Maximus rose and followed him to a

space where the gnarled silver-grey trunks were more widely spaced. They looked down to the valley floor.

One thin column of dust followed by a wide, dense one. A solitary rider was being hunted down by at least thirty horsemen. No one in the olive grove spoke. In the randomness of his fear, the hunted man was riding directly towards them.

'The eye of Cronus is on us,' muttered Demetrius. The others said nothing. As the fugitive drew closer, they saw that he wore a light-blue tunic.

'Gods below,' said Maximus, 'it's one of ours.'

The lost Dalmatian trooper was almost in arrow shot when his horse stumbled. The man lost his seat, slid forward down the animal's neck. Trying to regain its balance, the horse plunged. The trooper fell. His momentum made him bounce once, high in the air, then, limbs flailing, he crashed to the ground. He scrambled to his feet, his pursuers surging all around him.

There was a moment of stillness: the Dalmatian stood, the Sassanids in a ring around him. The trooper's horse ran away to the right. One of the Sassanids followed to catch it.

Slowly, almost apologetically, the trooper drew his sword. He threw it down. The mounted men laughed. One spurred forwards. The trooper turned, started to run. A long blade flashed in the sun. There was a scream, a spray of bright blood, and the Dalmatian fell. The Sassanid cantered back into the circle. The wounded man got to his feet again. Another horseman rushed in. Again the flash of a blade. More blood, and again the man went down.

Maximus looked across at Calgacus. The Caledonian shook his head.

After the third pass, the Dalmatian remained on the ground, curled up, his arms covering his head. Their sport spoilt, the Sassanids called out insults, imprecations. Their prey remained down in the reddened dust.

The Sassanid who had gone to the right returned, leading the trooper's horse.

One in the ring of horsemen called an order, and the men unslung their bows. Another word of command and they drew and released. Almost as one, the arrowheads thumped into the Dalmatian's body.

The watchers on the hill had not moved.

A Persian slid from the saddle. Tossing his reins to a companion, he walked over to the corpse. With his boot on the body, he pulled out the arrows. The shaft of one had snapped; the others he handed back to their owners. The riders laughed and joked, teasing each other about their shooting. One carefully tied back his long hair with a bright strip of material.

Maximus became aware of his sword in his hand. He had no memory of unsheathing it. He held it behind his back so that it would not catch the sun. He forced himself to look away, at the others. Their whole attention was on the foot of the hill. They were all willing the enemy to leave.

Finally, when the watchers had thought they could bear no more, when even discovery and doomed violence had seemed better than the agony of waiting, a Persian shouted a word of command. The easterner on foot remounted, and the troop trotted off the way they had come.

Around him, Maximus had heard several men exhale noisily. He realized that he was one of them. 'Bastards,' he said.

Calgacus had not taken his eyes off the Sassanids. 'And would our boys have behaved better?'

Maximus shrugged.

It had not proved easy to sleep having just seen one of their *commilitiones* killed in cold blood, his butchered remains lying in view. Calgacus had moved the men further up the hill. It had done no good. A careless glance through the green leaves still revealed a glimpse of soiled blue tunic. The Greek youth Demetrius had said they should retrieve the man's body, offer him proper burial, at least a coin for the ferryman. Calgacus had overruled him. The Persians might return, they would be suspicious. But, Demetrius

had argued, others might be drawn to the sight. Calgacus shrugged: it was the lesser of two evils.

Twilight had found them more than ready to move. Calgacus had outlined the new plan. Since the gods clearly did not care for the idea of them reaching Samosata in the north, they would go west to Zeugma. They would soon come to a broad, high plain, almost twenty miles across, then a range of hills from which the Euphrates would be visible. They could do it in one night. Once in Zeugma, they would be safe. They had passed through the town on the march out. Its walls were sound, manned by the four thousand men of Legio IIII Scythica and another six thousand regulars. Best of all, they were commanded by the ex-consul Valens, and he was no friend of either the Sassanids nor treacherous bastards like Quietus, his brother Macrianus and their scheming father Macrianus the Lambe.

Calgacus had been about to give the word to set off when, boots slipping in the powdery soil, Demetrius ran up through the trees. When he reached them, he doubled up, panting like a dog after a run in the hot sun. One of the troopers, a good-looking man, helped him up into the saddle.

'Just a coin, a handful of dust.' Demetrius spoke to Calgacus, his tone defensive. 'I know if the reptiles come it will show that we have been here. But I had to. I could not let his soul wander for ever.'

Calgacus just nodded and gave the word to move out.

It had taken much longer to reach the plain than the Caledonian had suggested. When they did, it seemed to stretch on without end. On and on they had ridden, the stars high above as distant and heartless as the eyes of a triumphant mob. On either side, flat, grey nothingness. The men were bone-tired. They had lived with constant fear for too long. In the face of the plain's immensity, even Maximus had felt his composure slipping, his mind summoning up ghastly imaginings. After a time, it had seemed to him that it was the plain that moved while they stood still. It was like those

stories Demetrius told: they were already dead, their sins on earth had been judged. They had been sent to Tartarus and it was their fate to ride this dark plain for ever, never reaching safety, never again seeing the sun.

Yet the grey light of pre-dawn had come all too soon. It revealed the hills in the west, but they were still a way off. All around them lay the emptiness of the plain. There were a few shrubs, the odd wind-bent tree; nothing to hide them. About a mile ahead, stark and incongruous, was a lone building. Anyone with any pretensions to fieldcraft knows not to hide in a solitary building; it is the first place searchers will look. Nevertheless, Calgacus led them straight towards it. There was nowhere else.

The building was a large, rectangular mud-brick barn. It had contained animals and people but now it stood empty. They led their horses in by the one, wide door. Inside, they hoisted a look-out up on to the beams. Some of the tiles were missing; Calgacus pushed out a few more in order to be able to see all around. The elevation increased the depth of his view. The other men rubbed down their horses and searched for food. There was none. There was a well outside, but there was always the possibility that it might be poisoned. They still had water in their bottles, but they had eaten their last scraps of food the night before. They could cut grass for the horses, but the men would have to go hungry.

Maximus had taken the second watch. He had to shift around the roof to keep an eye on all approaches, and it was just as well: falling asleep would bring with it the risk of a nasty fall. Another of Demetrius's stories floated into the Hibernian's mind. On Circe's island, one of Odysseus's crew had fallen asleep on the roof of the palace. He had tumbled off and broken his neck. Sometimes when Demetrius told the story, the man had been bewitched and turned into a pig. *There* was a thought – roast pork: hot, blistered crackling, the fat running down your chin. Infernal gods, Maximus was hungry.

Somewhat distracted by the demands of his stomach, it had

taken Maximus a few moments to take on board what his eyes were seeing. The peasant couple with the donkey, the man riding, the woman walking behind, were quite close by. Maximus dropped down from the beams. He woke Demetrius and gave him a leg-up into the roof. Turning, he found Calgacus on his feet. A word or two of explanation passed between the two men, and they walked outside.

At the sight of the strangers, the peasant stopped his donkey with a word and his wife, her eyes downcast and inattentive, with a stick. His tattooed face registered no surprise. Like the goatherd the other day, thought Maximus, they bred them incurious out here.

'Good day, grandfather,' Calgacus said in Greek.

The peasant replied with a muted flow of words in a language neither of the other men understood. Now they were closer, they could see that it was not tattoos on the man's face but dirt ingrained in every line.

Maximus tried a greeting in Persian. An emotion seemed to run across the peasant's face. It was gone before Maximus was even sure it had been there. Quietly the woman began to sob. The peasant hit her with his stick.

With gestures and broken sentences in a range of languages, Maximus asked if the couple had any food. The man's response, which involved much eloquent waving of hands and minimal grunting of incomprehensible words, was an extended denial. As far as Maximus could make out, riders had come from the east; they had taken all the food, beaten the peasant and his wife. They had done something else, too, taken something, a child. Boy or girl, it would have not gone well for them.

The woman started to weep again. She quietened at the sight of the stick.

Calgacus invited them into the barn. The peasant made it clear that he and his wife would remain outside.

There they sat, hands on their knees, up against the wall of what

could well have been their own home. As the sun arced across the sky, they moved around to keep in the shade. At intervals, the woman wept. Depending on how his emotions took him, the peasant would either sooth or threaten her. Maximus spent much of the day watching them, grieving for their naked misery. Even a man of violence such as himself could sometimes see the evil, naked face of the god of war – Mars, Ares, Woden, call him what you will: war is hell.

As the day faded, the men had tacked up, led their horses outside and swung into their saddles. Calgacus led them off to the west. Neither the peasant nor his wife showed any emotion at their departure.

Finally they had reached the hills. Finding an upward path despite the darkness, they took it. As the rocky slopes cut down their vision, they proceeded cautiously, placing two men out on point duty, fifty or more paces in front. And then they had come across the Persians.

Maximus looked away from Calgacus and back down at the enemy. The Sassanids were relaxed, perfectly unaware that they were being observed. They stood around where the three paths met, passing a wineskin back and forth. One of them raised his voice in song:

*'Dreaming when Dawn's left hand was in the sky
I heard a Voice within the tavern cry,
"Awake my Little ones, and fill the Cup
"Before Life's Liquor in its Cup be dry."'*

The Persians laughed.

That's it, you goat-eyed bastards, thought Maximus, drink up every drop. Before Dawn's left hand is anywhere in the sky, in the next quarter of an hour, if you don't move, we are going to try and kill you – and we want you as drunk as possible when the sharp steel gets close.

Even if they did move, it was quite likely there would be a fight. If the Sassanids took the path to the north, all well and good. If they went west, the Romans might hope to follow and, once out of the hills, somewhere down on the narrow plain before the Euphrates, slip past into Zeugma. But if the Sassanids rode east, then there was no choice, there must be bloodshed.

One of the dark-grey shadows changed shape: a Persian leapt up into his saddle. He too sang, a voice less mellifluous than that of the first, but with a ring of authority:

*'And, as the cock crew, those who stood before
The Tavern shouted – "Open then the Door!
"You know how little while we have to stay,
"And, once departed, may return no more."'*

The Sassanids all mounted. They milled, sorting themselves into position.

Maximus, palms slick, held his breath.

The eastern troop clattered off to the north.