

PROLOGUE

The Mausoleum of Hadrian

The Day before the Kalends of April

‘THE LAST HOUR.’

The dying man lay on the floor, propped against the wall, with both hands pressed to the wound in his stomach.

Ballista bent over him. ‘The last hour of what?’

‘Tomorrow. The last hour of daylight. They are going to kill the emperor when he leaves the Colosseum.’

A noise came from somewhere below them in the depths of the tomb.

Ballista went to the door, stepping carefully over the two corpses.

The sounds of boots, hobnails on stone, the clatter of weapons. Armed men down at the entrance of the Mausoleum. There were a lot of them. They were coming up the stairs.

Ballista went back into the room.

‘Help me,’ the injured man said.

Ballista slapped him across the face. ‘Who?’

‘They never said.’

Ballista hit him again.

‘Please. I do not know.’

Ballista believed him.

‘Don’t leave me here.’

Ballista had killed the two knifemen when he had burst through the door, but he had been too late to save the informant. Still, he had found out the time and the place.

‘Please.’

The mission had not failed, not if Ballista could get away. He stood up.

‘They will kill me.’

Ballista moved to the door. The sounds were closer.

‘You cannot leave me.’

No way down. He had to go up. Ballista turned left, and started up the stairs two at a time.

‘You barbarian bastard!’

Ballista pounded up the stairs.

‘Bastard!’

The corridor ran in a spiral through the heart of the enormous monument. Ballista had been here once before, many years ago, when he first came to the city. The view of Rome was good from the top. He remembered a roof garden up there, and a statue of the Emperor Hadrian in a chariot. The Allfather willing, there would be another passageway down.

The meeting had been a trap. Scarpio had sent him to meet the informant. He had insisted Ballista go alone. Had the Prefect of the City Watch known it was a trap? No time to think about that now. Work it out if he survived the next hour.

Ballista ran, holding his scabbard clear of his legs. Always upwards, always turning to the left. On and on, two steps at a time. As he ran under the light wells set in the ceiling, he flashed through insubstantial columns of bright air, then plunged back into the gloom.

His chest was beginning to hurt, his thigh and calf muscles complain. How far could it be to the top?

There were closed doors on the inner wall. He did not stop. If they gave onto chambers like the one that he had left, they would contain nothing but the ashes of long-dead members of imperial dynasties. They would offer no way down.

Raised voices, then a scream, echoed from below.

The men rushing up had found their friends, found the informant. The deaths of the former would not please them. It made no difference that the latter would tell them about Ballista. The armed men would want them both dead, and there was nowhere else that Ballista could have gone but up towards the roof.

Another scream echoed up the long passageway, then ended abruptly.

Every breath hurt. Sweat was running off Ballista. Would the stairs ever end? It was like some infernal punishment in myth.

A final corner, and there was the door. *All the gods, let it be unlocked.*

The door opened outwards. Ballista closed it behind him, and leant against it as he fought to regain his breath. Forty-three winters on Middle Earth; too long for this exertion.

The roof garden was gently domed, like a low hill. It rose to where a plinth supported the more than life-sized statue of the Emperor Hadrian in a triumphal chariot drawn by four horses. The terrible storms of the last several days had passed, but the air smelt of rain. The stones underfoot were still wet.

There had to be another way down. Ballista pushed himself off the door, set off up the path to the top.

The sun was dipping towards the horizon. It cast long shadows from the cypress trees, dappled where they were festooned with vines or ivy. Less than an hour until darkness.

Ballista circled the base of the statuary. No door, no trapdoor. Nothing. There had to be another way down. A passageway for gardeners, plants, servants. He looked around wildly.

Under the cypresses the garden was thickly planted with fruit trees and flower beds. Paths radiated out. There were hedges, potted plants, heavy garden furniture, small fountains, more statues. The service

access would be carefully hidden. The elite did not want to see slaves when they were enjoying the views. There was no time to search.

Ballista thought of the light wells. No. Even if he could find one of them, it would be too narrow, offer no handholds. Another thought came to him. He took the path down to the east.

There was a thin wooden rail above a delicate and ornamental screen along the edge of the garden, with yet more statues at intervals. Ballista did not look at the city spread out beyond the river, barely glanced at the swollen waters of the Tiber at the foot of the monument. He gripped the sculpted marble leg of Antinous, the doomed boy, loved by Hadrian. A Roman might have been troubled by the association. As heir to the different world view of the north, such omens did not bother Ballista. He had a head for heights, and leant out as far as he dared over the rail.

The cladding of the Mausoleum was white marble. The blocks were so artfully fitted together that there was barely a discernible line where they joined. No hope of a finger hold. Seventy foot or more of smooth, sheer wall down to the base, after that ledge perhaps another forty foot down to the narrow embankment and the river. No way to climb down.

Ballista ran back to the head of the stairs, opened the door. The men were nearing the top. Their laboured ascent was loud. There was nothing else for it. Without any conscious thought, Ballista went through his own silent pre-battle ritual: right hand to the dagger on his right hip, pulled it an inch or so out of its sheath then snapped it back; left hand on the scabbard of his sword, right hand pulling the blade a couple of inches free before pushing it back; finally he touched the healing stone tied to the scabbard.

Allfather Woden, watch over your descendant. Do not let me disgrace my forefathers. If I am to die, let me die as one worthy of my ancestors.

Ballista took off his cloak and wound the thick material around his left forearm as a makeshift shield, arranging the folds so that about a foot was hanging down to catch and entangle the weapon of an opponent.

He did not want to die. There was too much to live for: his wife Julia, their sons Isangrim and Dernhelm, his closest friend Maximus. He pushed the thoughts away. There were no choices. Either fight his way through, or fall sword in hand. If he were to die, let it not be as a coward.

Ballista drew his sword with a flourish, like some martial vision imagined by a priest.

Do not think, just act.

He went back through the door, pulled it shut, and took his station behind the last corner of the stairs.

The men were near the top.

It was a pity the stairway was wide enough for two men to attack at once, three if they risked encumbering each other.

Heavy footfalls, grunts of effort, the rattle of weapons. They were almost upon him.

Sword down across his body, his back to the steps, Ballista stilled his breathing. Setting his boots close together, he balanced on the balls of his feet. *Just wait. Not long now. Wait.*

The noise of their approach thundered back off the walls, nearer and nearer, building to a crescendo.

Now!

He stepped out and swung the blade backhanded in one fluid motion.

The edge of the steel caught the first man full in the face. A spray of blood, hot and stinging Ballista's eyes. The others stopped, stunned by the attack as unexpected as an apparition.

Infernal gods, there are so many of them.

Ballista recovered his blade from the ruined face, and shoved the man down the stairs. The mortally injured man clawed at those on either side, collided with those behind. Densely packed, they all staggered back, clutching at each other, struggling not to fall.

‘Kill him!’ Further down the stairs someone was yelling.

Ballista advanced, thrust at a figure to his right. The man blocked with military precision, but gave ground anyway.

Ten, twelve, or more – Ballista could not see them all. The throng stretched around the curve, out of view.

‘He is alone. Kill him!’ The voice from below was high with emotion, but vaguely familiar.

Two men readied themselves. The others waited a few steps below. This was bad. They knew their business, and did not intend to get in each other’s way. They were dressed in civilian clothes, but were equipped for the task. Each held a gladius. The short sword had gone out of fashion with the legions, but in a confined space was a nimbler weapon than the long blade Ballista carried.

The two glanced at one another, then rushed up. The one on the left aimed a cut at Ballista’s legs. Ballista caught the blow with the hanging folds of his cloak, turned it across his front, dragged the man between him and the other assailant. Thrust, always thrust. The steel only needed to go in an inch or two to be fatal. The man tried to jerk back, but his momentum was against him. It was not a clean thrust. The tip of Ballista’s blade scrapped up across the breastbone before plunging into the soft flesh of the throat.

Ballista withdrew his sword. More blood, spraying everywhere. The man collapsed against his colleague. Ballista dropped to one knee, and swung around the dying man at the uninjured one’s thigh. Sometimes you could not thrust. It was like a butcher’s cleaver chopping into a side of meat. The man howled, and went down. His

sword clattered on the marble steps. He would not die, unless he bled to death, but he was out of the fight.

Now was the moment to attack. Break the resolve of the others, send them rushing back down the stairs.

Ballista descended, fast but careful. The steps were slick with blood. Sword out in front. Use the longer reach. He yelled a barbaric war cry of his youth. The sound roared from the stones of the arched passage, primeval and terrifying.

The men did not lose their nerve and flee pell-mell down the stairs. They barely flinched. Squat and purposeful, they had closed three across, no intervals now between the ranks. Crouching, swords to the fore, cloaks wrapped around their left arms, they had formed an impromptu warhedge. No novices, they knew what they were about.

Ballista feinted at the one to his left, then jabbed at the swordsman in the centre. The man parried. The one to the left closed the distance, thrust. The impact jarred up Ballista's arm. He felt the steel slice through the wadded material of his cloak, but not deep enough to reach his forearm. Quick as a snake, Ballista jabbed at his face. The man ducked under the blow, then retreated, two steps, then three. The other two in the front fell back with him. The rear ranks let them give ground. Ominously disciplined, the formation kept its defensive line.

This would not work. Quickly, while he had a moment of time, a little space, Ballista needed to come up with another plan.

'Finish him!' The same disembodied voice from below.

The hired killers looked at each other, but did not move.

Backwards, face to the enemy, Ballista went back up above the fallen men. He grabbed the wounded man by the scruff of his tunic, pulled him half up, got the blade across his neck.

‘One step and your tent-mate dies.’

In the gloom, the eyes of the men below shifted from Ballista to each other, searching for who would take the initiative.

‘I am going to the roof. If you follow, when the first man comes around the corner, I will cut your friend’s throat.’

The men were silent, unmoving.

‘I will take others with me. You were paid to kill, not to die.’

Ballista retreated, dragging the wounded man with him.

Those below did not move.

Out of sight, Ballista hauled his captive through the door. He left it open, to hear.

No sound of pursuit yet. It would not be long.

‘Let me live.’ The man spoke softly.

Ballista was looking around, thinking. He was almost out of options.

‘I have a wife, children. I needed the money.’

Ballista pulled his head back. ‘You chose the wrong employment.’

‘I do not want to die.’

‘Do not be afraid,’ Ballista said. ‘Death is nothing. A return to sleep.’

With a practised hand, Ballista cut his throat. He fell like a sacrificial animal.

Automatically, Ballista wiped his blade on the dead man’s tunic. He had not believed his own words.

The half-remembered voice from below. ‘Cowards! Get up there and kill the barbarian.’

Ballista had seen what he wanted. He sheathed his sword. As he nudged the door shut with his boot, he heard the sounds of a cautious approach.

A few paces away was a garden bench. It was a bulky, elaborate piece of ironwork, its acanthus leaves and lotus flowers designed to complement the foliage of the garden for those sitting at their ease.

Straining every muscle, groaning with the effort, Ballista dragged it to the door, wedged it against the boards. It would not hold long, just buy him a short time.

Panting like a dog after his effort, Ballista set off through the garden towards the side facing the river. There was only one option left. It was not good.

The fragile rail by the statue of Antinous snapped with one hefty kick. A couple more and it was gone. Shattering the fine latticework of the screen it had supported caused no delay.

Ballista stood on the edge of the void. The river was far below him. On the far side the city was spread out, like the backdrop of a theatre. Off to his left stood the great bulk of the Mausoleum of Augustus, its circular drum echoing the tomb on which he stood. Next to it were flat and green open parks, dotted here and there with isolated monuments. The northern Campus Martius was laid out by the emperors to give their subjects somewhere to stroll, to give the urban plebs a taste of life in the luxurious country villas of the elite. Only a haze of smoke from the cooking fires of the homeless spoiled the image of the leisured countryside transposed to the city: *rus in urbe* invaded by vagrants.

Directly ahead were the ordered monuments of the southern Campus Martius. Ballista's gaze followed the curve of the Stadium of Domitian to the Baths of Nero. Beyond them and to the right rose the Capitoline, crowned with the Temple of Jupiter, its gilded roof still glittering in the late sunshine. Behind the Capitoline, also catching the light, were the roofs of the Palatine, under which the emperor might be about to pass his last night on earth, unless Ballista could warn him.

Ballista brought his thoughts back to the matter in hand. The river, so very far below, was already in shadow. The waters of the Tiber were tawny. The spring melt in the Apennines and the recent

days of rain had made it run high. Off to his right the final grain barge of the day was being towed to the warehouses. With the river in flood, it would have been a long, hard pull upriver; four days from the port, not the usual two or three. Just to his left the Pons Aelius was a thin, white line crossing the stream. Beyond the bridge, the last couple of rafts were being warped to the far bank. The nearer was laden with marble. On the further stood cattle, raised on the water meadows upriver. At this distance the cows looked as small as children's toys fashioned from lumps of clay and daubed with tan paint.

A muffled thumping from behind. They would have nothing but boots and fists and the pommels of their swords to break down the door. There was still a little time.

Ballista unwound the torn cloak from his left arm, let it fall on the damp earth. He took off his boots, then unbuckled his sword belt, and lifted the baldric over his head. He did not want the sword to fall into their hands. Battle-Sun was not just any sword. Forged in the dawn of time, it had passed down through generations of northern heroes until Heoden, king of the Harii, had given it to his foster-son Ballista. Briefly Ballista considered throwing it down into the river, but then he turned and looked for somewhere to hide the blade.

As he slid the scabbard under a clump of rhododendrons, the ornaments on the belts caught his eye. The embroidered wallet; money had never much concerned him. The Mural Crown, the original decoration awarded so many years ago for being the first man in the Roman army over the wall of an African town. The jewelled bird of prey that had travelled with him so much longer, down from the distant North, a gift from his mother. There was no time for sentimentality. If he survived, he could send a message asking his mother to send another.

The pounding was louder, more rhythmic, better organised.

Ballista went back to the edge. More than a hundred feet down to the river, perhaps as much as a hundred and fifty. Dangerous, not necessarily fatal. In his youth he had jumped from cliffs as high. But he had to clear the base of the Mausoleum and the narrow embankment.

The crack of splintering wood. A hoarse cheer.

Ballista took twelve long paces back from the lip. Far away was the dome of the Pantheon. Inconsequentially, he noticed it lined up perfectly with the Column of Trajan even further off.

Shouts. Men crashing through the shrubbery. Getting closer.

Do not think, just act.

Ballista forced himself to set off, put one foot in front of the other, gathering speed. A slight misjudgement. On the eleventh step he had to jump and leap out into the abyss.



CHAPTER 1

The City of the Dead
The Kalends of April
The Hours of Darkness

BALLISTA CLAWED AT THE AIR as he fell, clutching in panic for some imaginary purchase. The city and the river and the monument – without connection or reason – wheeled before his eyes.

Death Blinder do not let me die.

The dark river and the white embankment were rushing up. His limbs were flailing impotently.

Master yourself or die.

Ballista stopped thrashing, forced his arms across his chest, gripped his right wrist with his left hand. With a more than human effort, he leant back, brought his legs near together, slightly bent at the knee. His fall controlled, he plummeted feet first.

Allfather . . .

The water and the stones were surging up so fast. Had he jumped out far enough? Would he clear the bank? If not . . .

Be a man . . .

The pale brickwork was very close. Any second now would come the sickening impact, the snapping of bones, his body splattered like a crushed insect.

Then the wall of the embankment was flashing past, the river reaching for him.

Agony as he hit the water. White hot pain running up his legs, flaring in the small of his back, knocking the breath from him.

Driven down deep, his feet sank into mud. Sediment blossomed around him. He could see nothing. A surge of fear, as he thought he was held fast by the clinging sludge, then the current took him. The water cleared a little, and a moment later his head and back thumped against the masonry of the embankment.

Better to stay under until he was some distance from the Mausoleum. But there was no air in his lungs. He had to breathe. There was light above him, light and air. Strong in the water, he struck out for the surface. The awful realisation dawned that the undertow had him. He could make no progress. Fear again rising, hard to control. His chest was crushed, on fire. The light getting no closer.

In the opaque murk of the river, he half saw the looming riverine wall. Twisting, he found the bricks with his feet. A convulsive shove, and this time he shot upwards.

Breaking the surface, Ballista gulped in the air, coughing and spluttering.

The great bulk of the Mausoleum was receding. Small figures, black against the sinking sun, were silhouetted at its top. Could they see him? The river was in deep shadow. Had he gone far enough?

Filling his lungs, Ballista slipped below the surface, and let the river take him.

The pain in his chest, and the bitter residue of fear, would not let him remain submerged for long.

Resurfacing, the Mausoleum was appreciably smaller. The figures were gone. Perhaps they were already rushing down to search the dockside.

The clouded waters surged against the retaining wall. He was being swept past the imperial gardens. There were empty jetties, and here and there the roofs of pavilions showed above the foliage. Downstream was a bridge, and through its arches Ballista could see a line of tall warehouses, and further off the ramshackle huts of

fishermen. Beyond the bridge, there would be people. If he wanted to slip away unnoticed, to leave no trail for his pursuers, he had to get out now. With evening drawing in, the pleasure gardens should be deserted.

A jetty was approaching. Ballista started to swim. His back still ached, and the pain in his chest was undiminished. He put them out of his mind, and angled across the current. He was close, safety no more than a few strokes off, when the impersonal power of the river again seized him. For a few moments he struggled, before surrendering, and letting himself be rolled out towards midstream.

The Tiber in flood was notorious for the strength of its sudden eddies and whirlpools. To escape, good swimmer though he was, neither technique nor brute strength would serve. Ballista had to think, read the water, turn it to his advantage. No mortal could fight the god of the river and win.

There was another landing-stage: solid pillars and a ladder.

Ballista scanned the surface. Inshore the water was racing, bouncing back from the retaining wall, foaming through the uprights of the pier. Ahead floated the bloated carcass of a dog. It dipped, bobbed up again, and was drawn out, away from the bank. Perhaps the beginning of a whirlpool. Against all instinct, Ballista swam away from the shore.

In moments he felt his pace increase, as the turbulent waters carried him along. He was still going out as the dead dog turned, and was dragged back towards the quay. The stream pulled Ballista in its wake. A half remembered line of Stoicism: *A man is tied to his fate, like a dog to a cart.*

This would all be about timing. Ballista watched the cadaver. Fate was not immutable. Some five paces from the nearest pole of the landing-stage, the crosscurrent hit the dog, and sent it spinning downriver.

Not yet. Wait. The river was in turmoil where the currents collided. Fifteen paces, ten.

Ballista gathered all his strength.

Now! He launched himself into the maelstrom.

Three strokes, and the race pushed him sideways. Five strokes. The massive wooden pile just out of reach, the ladder just beyond. Summoning all his resolve, he drove towards them.

A desperate lunge, and his right hand found the upright. Coated in slime, it offered no grip. He was slipping, the water tugging at him. A mortal could not fight the father of waters.

A stinging pain, as the head of a projecting nail tore the palm of his hand. Regardless of the injury, he clutched the spike. The river was determined to tear him away. Somehow he hauled himself in, hugged the foul timber, got a leg around it.

The ladder was to his right, just too far to reach. One push, and he would be there. The water breaking over his shoulders, Ballista could not force himself to let go of his temporary sanctuary.

This was absurd. His courage could not fail him now. *Be a man.*

Still he did not move.

Do not think, just act.

He lunged at the ladder, grabbed one of its rungs. With a snap audible above the roaring water, it shifted. The whole thing threatened to give way. Spurred into action, Ballista swarmed up the slippery, unstable woodwork, and hauled himself onto the decking.

He lay for a moment, sucking in air, blinking at the sky. High up swallows banked and swooped. A promise of fair weather.

Rolling over, he crawled to one of the pillars, set his back against the wood.

If he could get to the pleasure gardens, he would be able to find somewhere to lay up. First, he needed to see if he could walk. It would take the knifemen some time to get down from the roof of

the Mausoleum, and he had been carried quite a distance downriver. There was no time to waste, but he had a few moments respite. He began to check himself over, swiftly, yet with care and methodically. There was a nasty cut on his right palm. It would need washing and dressing. The river was filthy. Without a knife, he could not tear his tunic for a makeshift bandage. It would have to wait. His feet were now bare. They were livid, soon they would be covered with bruises. His legs and back ached. Flexing them proved that nothing was broken. His chest was another matter. Every movement brought a sharp stab of discomfort. Deliberately he took a deep, shuddering breath. The left side of his ribcage hurt, but the pain was not so intense as to indicate that any ribs were fractured. Most likely one or two were cracked, or that some of the muscles between them had been torn.

Using the pillar, he levered himself to his feet, then lent against it while a wave of nausea passed. The decking where he had sat was stained dark with the water oozing from his tunic and trousers.

Some atavistic sense for danger made him look upstream. A group of men not far from the Mausoleum, working their way downriver, still a couple of hundred paces off. At least twenty of them, they were searching the bank. They had not seen him yet.

At the end of the landing stage a paved path ran away into the gardens. To run would be to give himself away. If he acted naturally, at this distance, they might not realise it was him.

Ballista walked slowly down the jetty. He kept his left arm pressed to his ribs. Each step stung the soles of his feet. He moved out onto the towpath. Halfway across, he heard the shout.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the men break into a run.

Ballista set off like a hare.

In moments he was out of sight. The gardens stretched away on either side.

Should he go left or right? Away from them or double back? Behind him he could hear them baying like hounds.

Ballista ran left.

There was a walkway, but it was gravel, and his feet were bare. Ballista hurdled a low hedge, and took off across a lawn. There was a wide grove of trees ahead. The outliers were low fruit trees. He ducked down under the blossom, almost crawling, and emerged into an open space artfully designed to resemble a forest clearing. A tall figure stood in the centre, wearing a headdress of reeds and sporting an enormous erection. There were flowers at his feet. Priapus, carved in wood, served as both scarecrow and warning to evil-minded men who would desecrate this glade. Ballista went around the deity, and into the stand of tall trees beyond. These oaks had been ancient when the gardens had been laid out. Almost at once, he saw one with its lowest branch growing out near horizontal only a couple of feet above his head.

Ballista jumped, got both hands on the bough. His battered body complained as he scrambled up, the rough bark grazing his arms. From that branch he climbed to another, then one higher still. Finally he wedged himself where a huge limb formed an angle to the trunk.

Ballista was not sure how well he was hidden. A passage of Tacitus came to mind. Some battle, long ago in the northern forests. The Germans had taken refuge in the trees. The Roman soldiers had shot them down like sitting birds. Sometimes a Classical education brought little comfort. Yet there was a difference between a lone fugitive and a multitude. Most men, especially those bred in the city, never raised their eyes from the ground.

The passage of time slowed. The air was full of birdsong. Through the foliage, Ballista could see the rustic head of Priapus, the reeds stirring in the evening breeze. He waited. For nine nights and nine

days the Allfather had hung from the Tree of Life. No one comforted him with bread, revived him with a drink from a horn. Nine days and nine nights, and the Allfather Woden had learned the secrets of the dead. Ballista waited.

The sunlight only touched the very tops of the oaks, and the evening chorus faded as the song birds sought their nests for the night.

Ballista heard the men coming: barked orders and guttural responses. They blundered through the fruit trees. Clearly they felt no need for discretion. Neither the City Watch nor the local police who conducted nocturnal patrols on the right bank of the Tiber concerned them.

Ballista saw three hairy, somewhat unkempt men walk out into the clearing. They were well spaced, fifteen paces or more apart, like beaters drawing a covert. They wore a motley array of clothes, one had shoulder-length hair, but the swords in their hands, the ornaments on their belts, and the way they moved, all proclaimed military service. One wiped the sweat from his forehead. There was a tattoo on his wrist. Too far to see which unit, but it was the final proof.

There was little undergrowth below the oaks, and the hunters stepped out quickly, scanning this way and that. One was heading straight for the tree in which Ballista had tried to conceal himself.

Stilling his breathing, Ballista watched the man. *Allfather, do not let him look up.*

The man stopped beneath the oak. He stretched, rolling the stiffness out of his neck, then looked to either side, waiting for the others to catch up: a trained soldier dressing the line.

Suddenly the man glanced up, as if aware he was observed.

Ballista shut his eyes.

The noise of men moving further off. From the base of the tree no sound.

Ballista peered down.

The soldier was rubbing his shoulders. A veteran on manoeuvre, with no immediate threat in sight, he waited stolidly.

A whistle, and the line moved on again.

Ballista did not move, hardly dared breathe.

Soon the noise of their passage diminished.

The centurions of few regular auxiliary units, and none in any legion, would tolerate such a slovenly turn out. Perhaps they were not soldiers, but deserters. The gods knew there were enough of them. Not all that long ago, back in the reign of Commodus, a man called Maternus had raised an army of them. He had terrorised Gaul and Spain, sacked whole towns, even tried to kill the emperor himself.

The sound of the hunters was lost in the sighing of the wind through the broad canopy of leaves. There was no telling how soon they would return. Ballista clambered down from his perch. His ribs and feet hurt. The cut on his palm throbbed. He needed to rest, but had to find somewhere more secure. Putting aside the pain and fatigue, he retraced his steps.

Coming out on the path through the gardens, he turned left, away from the river. The heat of the day was still in the smooth paving stones. It seemed to burn the tender soles of his feet.

Abruptly, the paving gave way to a track of beaten earth, and the gardens on either side ended. The land here was rough heath. The necks of dozens of half-buried amphorae protruded from the earth. Some had been dug up and broken. There was a scatter of white bones. It was a graveyard of the poor, one of the many that ringed Rome. Not of the destitute; they would be pitched into mass graves. Here the corpses of slaves, pulled from their narrow cells, would be brought by other servile members of their household, and the urban plebs would be carried in a cheap box. It stood right next

to the shaded gardens, where the living and the affluent strolled and talked, and ate delicacies off silver plate. No wonder that the inhabitants of the eternal city held mixed feelings about the suburban areas. They were places of pleasure, of parks and pavilions, where you took your leisure. At the same time, they were where the city dumped its rubbish, deposited its dead, where the condemned were executed, and funeral pyres burned.

Ahead was a necropolis for the better off. Ballista had long got used to the Roman custom of fashioning tombs that resembled houses, and of building them together, as a city of the dead. There were two streets running away to the left. He turned into the second.

Never hide in a solitary structure. It would draw your pursuers like a magnet. But in one among many, you would have some warning, hear the search working towards you. Not all these tombs were tended. Ballista passed several with gaping doors. He stopped at the fourth or fifth that had been opened, one set back down a narrow passage.

Undesirables lurked in such surroundings; vagrants, down on their luck prostitutes and their clients, midnight hags in search of ingredients for their arts. If disturbed, they might raise the alarm. He was uncertain if he was in a condition to stop them.

He took a deep breath, causing a spasm of pain in his ribs. It would be as the Fates decreed.

Cautiously, he entered the tomb.

For a time he stood, braced for an outcry or attack, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness.

A smell of dust, of mould and faint decay. No movement in the still air. The tomb was empty.

Wearily he folded himself down to sit with his back to a wall, and thought what had brought him to this place, and of the man that he had left to die in the Mausoleum.

Scarpio, the Prefect of the City Watch, had said the informer would only talk to an individual. Ballista must go alone, and, as there was no knowing how far the conspiracy had spread, he must tell no one. The informer was an ex-slave and a thief. Pilfering from the changing room of the baths on the Caelian Hill, the day before, he had heard two men approaching, and had hidden. Only one of the men had spoken, but the eavesdropper claimed that he had caught every word.

Gallienus will leave the amphitheatre at the last hour. Once he is in the passageway, out of the imperial box, present your petition. While he is distracted, strike. Do not waste words, no prattling about liberty, strike quickly. Do not be afraid. The guards will not stop you. Remember we will all be there.

Ballista wondered how accurate the dialogue was. Even the great Thucydides had admitted that in the speeches in his *History* he could not always give the exact words, but instead would provide those appropriate. At least Ballista was sure the informant had done the latter.

The conspirators had not seen the spy, but, as they left, he had had a glimpse of their faces. Both were old and well-dressed. The silent one was bald, the talker had a face like a peasant. In a city of a million souls, it was not much to go on.

Now that Ballista was accustomed to the faint light in the tomb, he saw there were frescos on the walls and ceiling. In the gloom above his head was the glimmer of white horses pulling a chariot driven by a god. On the opposite wall a shepherd carried a sheep on his shoulders. More puzzling, on another wall a man who had fallen from a boat appeared to be about to be consumed by a sea monster, perhaps a whale. The hero of Lucian's *True Story* had been swallowed by a whale. The satire was an unlikely choice for a funeral monument.

Could it be Jonah and the whale? A story of the strange cult of the crucified god? Ballista had encountered Christians in the East. A sect of them had betrayed his defence of the town of Arete on the Euphrates. He had been given the unpleasant task of overseeing their persecution in Ephesus. They were spreading everywhere, seemingly even to here, the insalubrious and unhealthy *Ager Vaticanus*.

The light dimmed, and the paintings blended back into the walls. It was almost fully dark.

Tomorrow. The last hour of daylight. They are going to kill the emperor.

And only Ballista could save him.



CHAPTER 2

The Bridge of Nero

CUI BONO? WHO WOULD BENEFIT if Emperor Gallienus was killed?

Ballista sat in the dark, thinking.

Postumus, the pretender in the West, was the obvious choice. While Gallienus had wintered in Rome, his troops had been gathering on the plains of northern Italy. In four days Gallienus would leave to lead them over the Alps. Postumus had sent several envoys saying that he did not want to fight, that he would defend the Rhine from the barbarians, and was content with the provinces he ruled. They had been wasted journeys. While Gallienus lived, nothing could avert war. At the outset of his rebellion, five years before, Postumus had killed Gallienus' favourite son.

Ballista's legs ached. Gingerly he tried to stretch the stiffness out of them.

Postumus was far from the only candidate. Odenathus of Palmyra ruled Rome's eastern provinces, nominally in the name of Gallienus. Ballista knew Odenathus, and thought he harboured no greater ambitions. But those around the Palmyrene were another matter, especially his wife Zenobia. If Gallienus were assassinated, it might force Odenathus to make a bid for the throne.

Stretching was not helping. Ballista used the wall of the tomb to lever himself to his feet.

Here in Rome the senate had no love for Gallienus. Many of their number claimed to find the emperor's lifestyle offensive: the boys and girls, the drinking in arbours of flowers, the philosophy and poetry. More to the point, they resented being excluded from high military commands, and thought Gallienus did not treat them with the respect they deserved. Among the nobility there would be those who thought their lineage better qualified them to wear the purple.

Whoever was behind the plot, did they not realise the chaos that would ensue? If Gallienus was struck down, the intricate web of alliances that he had woven along the Danube would unravel. The barbarians – Goths, Alamanni, and Sarmatians – would pour over the river. They would bring fire and sword to the frontier, untold destruction to the peaceful, unarmed provinces to the South. Greece, the cradle of civilisation, would lie open. Athens would burn.

Ballista knew there was worse. When an emperor was murdered, those close to him would also die, their estates would be confiscated, their families hunted down. Political expediency and the need for funds to reward supporters of the new regime would result in a bloodbath.

Ballista was counted a friend of Gallienus. If he were executed, his family . . . He pushed the thought away, sought something else to occupy his mind.

Was Scarpio part of the conspiracy? The Prefect of the City Watch had prevailed on Ballista's loyalty, but had he sent him to his death? Scarpio had insisted Ballista go alone: time had been of the essence, who could tell how far the plot reached? No one at court could be trusted. Ballista had only met the prefect once before. Returning from the distant North, Ballista had been welcomed by Gallienus, had been seated at the emperor's right hand in the Circus. Scarpio,

standing at the rear of the imperial box, had been one of those cursorily introduced. Although Ballista did not know the prefect, his reasoning had been cogent. It was possible that Scarpio had acted in good faith.

With geriatric slowness, Ballista walked through the darkness to the door.

A sudden noise outside made him freeze. The footsteps passed by the tomb.

His heart was pounding. He was in no condition for this: alone and unarmed, battered and in pain, barefoot with no money or friends, and on the wrong side of the river. His family came into his mind. No, he would not give way to despair. The thing was simple. He had to save Gallienus, and all would be well.

As youths they had grown up together, diplomatic hostages on the Palatine for the good behaviour of their fathers; the one a leading senator, the other a client king. Years later, serving in the East, Ballista had been forced to let himself be acclaimed as emperor. After a few days, he had stepped down. Even so, under most rulers such presumption would have led to the headsman's block. Gallienus had spared him, and subsequently entrusted him with important missions. Everything else aside, Ballista was honour-bound to save the emperor.

He needed a plan.

Turning, he began to pace, trying to walk off the hurt, order his fractured thoughts.

To the South was *Transtiberim*. The region was densely populated with immigrants from the East: Syrians, Jews, Armenians, even Parthians and Persians from beyond the frontier. They worshipped strange gods – *Hadad*, *Iaribol*, and *Malakabel* – Ballista had no friends among these people. Then there were the barracks of men seconded from the fleet at Ravenna. Ballista had never served

with them. Again, there was no reason to expect their help. And there was a station of the City Watch, but given the circumstances they were best avoided.

He needed to cross the Tiber. Swimming was not an option. Some doctors recommended swimming the river as a cure for insomnia. With the Tiber in flood, it would bring a sleep from which there would be no waking. The river was not so fast that you could not row across. But he had nothing with which to pay his passage, and stealing a boat would raise an outcry. It would have to be a bridge. Most likely the knifemen from the Mausoleum would be watching them.

Ballista stopped by the door.

He had lived in Rome for years in his youth. The rhythms of the streets of the city were eternal, as familiar as his own heartbeat. If he was to slip across unnoticed, there was no better hour than now.

Part of him did not want to leave the tomb. *Be a man*, he told himself. There was no choice.

At first, as he made his way down through the graveyards and gardens towards the river, the streets were nearly deserted. A lone wagon passed, going in the other direction. It was stacked with unclaimed corpses. Every night the metropolis produced its harvest of paupers. Naked and waxy, they made their last journey to some mass burial pit. No headstone would mark their grave, no coin in the mouth would pay the ferryman.

The collectors of the dead did not speak to Ballista, and he did not acknowledge them. They lived outside the city, only allowed to enter to ply the trade that set them apart from humanity.

At a crossroads was a small fountain, water spilling from the mouth of a dragon. Ballista washed thoroughly. The cold water stung and partly opened the gash on his palm. He rinsed and pushed back his long hair. He doubted he looked any more respectable.

The noise reached him first, a murmur of many voices like the surf on a stony shore. It was punctuated with the sharp calls of different animals. Then came the smell. There was cut wood, fresh produce, and flowers, but also sweat and dung, both human and bestial.

The queue stretched back two hundred paces from the Bridge of Nero. There were herds of sheep and pigs and cattle, wagons full of timber and kindling, carts piled with roses and jasmine or laden with vegetables, in-season asparagus and artichokes. There were trussed chickens and loose dogs. All, apart from the latter, waiting their turn at the customs house.

This was the produce of local villas and market gardens brought in by road. The staples that fed the megalopolis – grain, oil, and wine – came by river. Some was floated downriver on rafts, but much more was towed against the current from the ports where it was offloaded having been shipped from abroad.

It was clear that Ballista had nothing to declare, and he was largely ignored as he walked up the line.

Ahead, a herd of nine or ten bullocks was playing up. An old man and a boy chased after the stamping, agitated beasts. No one helped them. Some of the onlookers scuttled away from the widespread horns; others laughed. As a child, Ballista had joined the thralls herding in his father's cattle.

Standing tall, arms outspread – now hallooing, now silent – he helped round them up, calm them, get them to a stand.

'We have nothing to pay you.' The old peasant had the ingrained suspicion of his sort.

'I want no coins, Grandfather.' Ballista addressed him with respect.

The peasant grunted, turned away in dismissal.

'A swallow of wine would be welcome.' Ballista nodded at the pack the man wore. 'Perhaps a bite of bread.'

The old man gestured Ballista to sit, and told the boy to watch the cattle. He sat next to Ballista on the kerb, put aside his stockman's cudgel, opened the sack, and passed a wineskin.

The wine was smooth and well watered, brought for refreshment not intoxication. There was only the one skin, and Ballista was careful not to drink too much.

A usurer came down the queue, offering rates for those who needed credit to pay the custom's dues. The old man jerked his head back to send him on his way.

'You have had a hard time.' The peasant handed over the heel of a loaf.

Ballista chewed, just sipping the wine to moisten the hard bread.

'I was robbed,' he said at length. 'Out by the fifth milestone.'

'They were fools.' The rustic nodded at Ballista's hand which held the wineskin.

On the third finger was the gold ring of an equestrian. Ballista had forgotten it was there.

'A god blinded them, or they were fools,' Ballista finished the bread, and gave back the wine.

The queue moved, and they got to their feet to drive the cattle forward.

They halted not more than fifty paces from the customs post. It was lit by torches. Ballista could see those at the front being divided. The livestock was corralled into pens to be counted for the Gate Tax. The vehicles remained in the road, their contents tallied for the Handle Tax. Ballista could see a squad of eight of the City Watch lounging against the parapet of the bridge. That was to be expected. Their equipment – axes, buckets, unlit torches – were scattered around their feet. The *Spartoli*, the Little Bucket Men, as they were known, did not look alert. Apart from the customs men,

he could see no one else checking the multitude entering the city. No sign of the men from the Mausoleum.

‘Where were you coming from?’ The eyes of the old man were pale blue, bright in a face tanned and lined by a life out in the weather.

‘I am a soldier, returning from a posting in Africa. Most of my money was lost at dice on the boat. I had to walk up from the port.’

‘Now you have nothing, but that ring.’ The peasant took a pull of wine. ‘What will you do in the city?’

‘My service is ended. My brothers in the emperor’s German Guard will take care of me until my discharge pay comes through.’

‘Your Latin is good, but I could tell you were a barbarian. You could not be anything else at that size, and with that fair hair and chalky skin.’

The peasant seemed to have accepted the story. *Crafty Odysseus*, Ballista thought, *cunning Loki*.

‘Will you be going home to your people?’ Now that they were talking, the attitude of the rustic was thawing.

The boy had sidled closer. ‘Did you fight in any battles?’

The old man hefted his cudgel. ‘Hold your tongue when your elders are talking.’

The boy backed off, not looking greatly abashed.

‘Usually my brother comes on the drove. He has the fever. That is his son. Useless, a dreamer. His first time in the city. If I take my eye off him, they will rob him blind, fuck him up the arse, turn him into a bitch.’

Ballista was grateful that the talk had moved from his invented life story, and he encouraged the peasant to talk. ‘You do not care for the city?’

‘Care for it?’ The rustic smacked his lips to avert evil. ‘It is a shithole. You can smell it a mile off. You cannot breath for all that smoke. Those tenements towering over you, never a glimpse of the

sun, a breath of fresh air. Streets ankle deep in shit and offal. People everywhere, pushing and shouting. Your best tunic gets ripped to shreds in the crush. You look down and your wallet is gone. No idea who did it. No one gives a fuck. You can hardly move, not hear yourself think in all that crush. Here is the great trunk of a fir tree swaying along on a wagon, another behind stacked high with pine logs, all about to topple on your head. If an axle snaps and a cartload of marble crashes down, what will be left of you? Who could identify bits of flesh and bone? Your flattened corpse vanishes along with your soul. Meanwhile, all unwitting, your wife at home is scouring dishes, blowing the fire to a glow, setting the soup to boil, filling up your oil flask, a pitcher of wine. A meal you will never eat. You are sitting by the Styx. No chance of a passage over, without so much as a copper stuck in your mouth.'

Like many unaccustomed to company, the rustic had a store of words when he found an audience.

'The beef has to be sold, but, if the gods were kind, I would not set foot in the city. My brother and me inherited our place from our father. Two huts, a byre, a barn, and an enclosure of palings for the calves. The vegetable garden is not large, but the home meadow grows a good deal of hay to put up. The pasturage is set in a valley, deep and shaded. Through the centre flows a quiet stream. The cows and calves can wade across with perfect ease. Abundant water, bubbling up clean and sweet from a spring nearby, and in the summer a breeze always blows through. Never a gadfly or any other pest. No wonder the cattle never range very far.'

'It sounds idyllic,' Ballista said.

The rustic gave him a sharp look. 'Better than this shithole, at any rate.'

At last it was their turn at the stock pens. A customs officer came over to talk to the old man. One of the City Watch glanced

over. Ballista averted his face, hunching slightly to disguise his height.

‘Carry on.’ The customs man, wax tablet and stylus in hand, went ahead to open the gate of the stock pens.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ballista saw the watchman talking to his neighbour. *Allfather, let it be about the weather, some girl.*

Ballista moved to the far side of the herd.

With a call, and a clout of his cudgel, the rustic tried to urge the bullocks into motion. At first they stood, sullen and mulish.

The two watchmen were walking around, their shadows disjointed in the guttering torchlight.

Ballista did not look at them again. It might be nothing.

The old man shouted louder, used the cudgel again.

Hooves clapping on the paving, reluctantly the beasts began to trudge after the customs officer towards the gate.

A hand grasped Ballista’s arm.

‘Don’t fight,’ the watchman said. ‘Marcus Clodius Ballista, you are under arrest.’