



DE BELLO LEMURES

OR THE ROMAN WAR
AGAINST THE ZOMBIES OF ARMORICA

LUCIUS ARTORIUS CASTUS

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the Zombies of Armorica*

Lucius Artorius Castus

ANNOTATED AND WITH AN
INTRODUCTION BY THOMAS BROOKSIDE

HISTORIC Ω CLASSICS

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FOREWORD

At the close of the last century, the revolutionary advances in the imaging of ancient manuscripts achieved by the team assembled by Baltimore's Walters Art Museum to recover the *Archimedes Codex C* ushered in a new era in paleography.^[1] Documents that had been believed to be irretrievably illegible due to the ravages of time, dirt, weather, vandalism, and even volcanic eruptions were now decipherable using the team's cutting-edge multispectral imaging and synchrotronic x-ray techniques. New technology made it possible to imagine that "lost" works by ancient playwrights, essayists, scientists and mathematicians might be rediscovered hiding in virtually any repository of ancient or medieval documents, and researchers swarmed through libraries and museum collections to seek them out.

Although the techniques in question were of great value in uncovering text obscured by water damage or carbonization, their greatest utility was in assisting the reading and deciphering of palimpsests.^[2] Even the most faint and obscure writing could be thrown into vivid relief by multispectral imaging of the materials used in different ink types. In the case of the *Archimedes Codex C*, although the original ink had been scraped off the pages with a pumice stone and the writing surface cleaned with acid by the 13th century monk who re-used the parchment to make a prayer book, researchers armed with the new technology were able to see past the monk's handwriting to the Archimedes text below it. As the technique was refined, even multiple palimpsests – where the erasing and overwriting process had happened more than once – yielded up their secrets.

It was perhaps inevitable that this process would lead to the discovery of so-called *secret palimpsests* [or "Yetis", as they are sometimes jokingly named in the paleography community] documents which had not previously even been identifiable as palimpsests because the original handwriting had been so thoroughly erased that it was no longer visible to the naked eye, or even under an ultraviolet lamp. After Oxford researchers discovered the first "Yeti", literally every ancient or medieval document had to be considered a potential palimpsest, and the amount of material that could be usefully subjected to analysis as part of the search for lost works expanded by several orders of magnitude.

It was during a comprehensive multi-spectral search of the document trove held at the Universitätsbibliothek Salzburg that the curious and much-debated work that follows was discovered. A contemporary copy of Freidank's *Bescheidenheit* that had not previously been identified as a palimpsest was revealed to be a "Yeti" by synchrotronic x-ray analysis. The Freidank copy had been assembled out of a pastiche of parchments from different documents. A portion of the underlying text

was quickly determined to be a fragment of Vitruvius' *On Architecture*; the balance, it eventually became clear, was something else indeed.

Lucius Artorius Castus was a minor figure in 2nd century history, known primarily from inscriptions, including his funerary inscription. Despite his personal obscurity [some might say insignificance], Castus is relatively well-known in the modern era, due mainly to the fact that his *nomen* [3] and some details of his life history and legionary cavalry service in Roman Britannia have caused him to be advanced as a candidate to have been the historical basis for the "Arthur" legend. When it was recognized that the new work purported to be a copy of a history written by Castus in the form of a long letter or address, delighted scholars hoped that it might shed light on this curious and interesting figure, as well as upon the broader history of the declining years of the Antonine dynasty. As the complete – or nearly complete – work was uncovered, that initial hope and delight turned in shock, and furious controversy.

The controversy, of course, arose from the fact that the letter purported to be an account of a *supernatural event* - or an epidemiological event so badly misunderstood as to appear supernatural - involving Roman legionaries and auxiliaries on the Brittany peninsula in the late 2nd century.

Immediately, accusations were leveled that the work was a forgery or hoax, but it was rapidly determined that this was virtually impossible. The chain of provenance of the Salzburg Freidank was beyond question, and that undisputed 13th century work was written *over* the Castus text. If *De Bello Lemures*, as the work became known [4], is a hoax, it has to be a 13th century hoax – and the question that would be raised if that were so would be almost as profound as those raised if the work is a genuine recounting of the experiences or perceived experiences of a 2nd century Roman nobleman. In the production of this translation I have worked with the assumption that the work is genuine.

Others have argued that, given the subject matter, it is plain that the work was intended to be a work of fiction or proto-novel after the manner of the *Satyricon*. This is, of course, a position that has in its favor the fact that it does not require us to explain the bizarre events the author describes. But this view is undermined by the fact that the type of narrative contained in *De Bello Lemures* was not attained elsewhere by Roman authors in the production of histories; as a proto-novel it would represent an advance in literary form, achieved just once for this work and never achieved again by any Roman author. In addition, the work would not merely be a literary advance as a proto-novel; it would represent a proto-novel written as a *faux* history, essentially leaping over the entire earlier history of the form and landing squarely in the middle of post-modernism. The proto-novel theory is also undermined by the fact that we have absolutely no evidence that Castus was a literary figure in addition to being a military one – no literary activity is mentioned in the inscription on his funerary monument, and no fragment of his writing or reference to his writing appears in the work of any other Roman author. To support the proto-novel thesis we would have to conclude that Castus was a unique literary figure who produced a unique literary work; and that despite this work being completely unnoticed by his contemporaries it was preserved by copyists for a thousand years before it was finally forgotten. Next to this string of unlike-lihoods, the idea that *De Bello Lemures* is exactly what it claims to be is not that incredible.

Archaeological research at sites referenced by Castus is ongoing. It is greatly aided by the precise description of locations and distances the author provides in his narrative. We may be just one turn of the spade and one more "discovery" away from settling the question of which camp in the debate over this work is correct. Until the question is settled, we have to be satisfied with the work

itself.

A Note on Punctuation:

All punctuation used here is interpolated from the text. Classical Latin did not employ punctuation. In some cases, to aid the readability of the text and for aesthetic purposes conversational recasts in the third person have been rearranged into the dialogue form, including conversation marks, that is customary and familiar to modern readers.



ONE

In the year when Marcus Umbrius Primus was *consul suffectus*^[5] the deserter and traitor Maternus^[6], drawing to himself the worst criminals and desperadoes, launched his revolt in that portion of Gallia Comata^[7] called Armorica.

Armorica consisted of a broad peninsula, extending a considerable distance out into Oceanus along with the land watered by the river Liger^[8] and its tributaries. Although included in the province of Gallia Lugdunensis, it has long been a backwater, with many of its villages as rude as they were when the great Julius first brought our civilization to the northern Gauls. The long traffic and commerce between the Armoricans and the tribes of Britannia, including the savage Selgovae and the Caledonii beyond our defenses, is no doubt responsible for this backwardness.^[9]

Maternus preyed upon the simplicity of the Armoricans, gaining their allegiance with false promises and deceptions. He took great advantage of the resentment of the peasant for the tax collector, as brigands of his kind always do. In each city his men freed all the prisoners, no matter how degenerate their crimes, and promised these men freedom in exchange for service;^[10] this same offer was made to many slaves. He also cruelly played upon the superstitions prevalent among the tribes of the peninsula, which the governors at Lugdunum^[11] have never been able to fully stamp out. His promises to restore the ancient religion of the grove won many of the uncouth to his side, and brought many secret Druids out of hiding.

I, Lucius Artorius Castus, was made *dux*^[12] of the cohorts sent by the Emperor to crush the bandits and to restore the writ of law. Crossing from Dubris to Gesoriacum^[13] with my Iazyges^[14] and with such cohorts of the VI Victrix as could be spared from duty at Eboracum^[15], I rapidly drove Maternus and his lieutenants into hiding^[16], and snuffed out the revolt as water will a flame.

It is not necessary for me to recount that campaign in any great detail here, as it has been exhaustively recorded in my letters to Publius Helvius Pertinax^[17], copies of which were read to the Senate. I mean instead, in this letter, to describe the strange and horrible events that followed the

revolt, after the last open defiance had been defeated in the field and those survivors who had not been captured and executed had melted away into the countryside. For in Armorica I met a greater enemy than any bandit chief or usurper. A horror stalks the forests there that cannot be propitiated, and the history must be heeded if it is not to devour us all.

We crucified the last of the rebel die-hards on a hill overlooking the thirteenth milestone outside of Portus Namnetus^[18] on the eve of the Kalends of November^[19]. They had been captured by us the day before, as they raided a nearby villa. Short of food and maddened by shame at our many victories over them, their foraging could no longer be distinguished from rapine, and their desperation made them careless. I had ordered lightly armed scouts and javelin-men from the provincial auxiliaries hidden among the farm outbuildings and in the *ergastulum*^[20] of the estate, and these had sprung forth when the raiders arrived; they fixed the enemy in place until cavalry hidden nearby could engage and capture them. We had piled the dead into an open offal midden and marched the prisoners to a site where their horrible end could be instructive to the passers-by.

The crucifixions were just a last bit of business to attend to prior to closing out the campaign. Each *palus*^[21] had been set to face as many of the others as possible, so that the rebels could all see the end to which their crimes had brought them and their fellows. I wished to conclude the execution that afternoon, in order to return my men on the following day to the main encampment outside the port; as the prisoners hung in the bronze autumn sun, we waited and fretted, impatient to leave. To speed matters along I had ordered that the *crurifragium*^[22] be performed; the executioner's boys had gone to each gibbet in turn and broken the condemned man's legs with a heavy iron bar, to hasten the moment at which their strength and breath would fail. This would save us much time, even if it was mercy that the rebels did not deserve; a man with his legs intact can survive on the cross for days, but without the ability to support his weight a prisoner will expire quite quickly.

With me was Radamyntos, the decurion of the senior *turma*^[23] of the Iazyges contingent, along with a group of local notables led by Gaius Iulius Rufus, called Rufus, the region's major landholder. Radamyntos and his countrymen were nearly as great a spectacle for the Armoricans as the punishment of the rebels; although they were a common sight on the frontier, no men of their race had ever penetrated this deep into the northwestern countryside of Gaul, and their odd appearance and behavior drew much attention. Although I was in standard undress uniform, wearing merely my *paludamentum*^[24] and belt, Radamyntos was in full armor even for this light duty, as was his custom. The citizens and the *peregrini*^[25] freely gaped at him. The Iazyges wear long-sleeved tunics of mail that extend down to the knee, and their sturdy conical helmets have iron nose guards that cover most of their faces. They drape their horses in thick leather set with bronze scales, and carry a heavy spear they call a *contus*^[26]. Radamyntos wore a belt to spread the weight of his mail: a golden hedgehog with unpolished gems for eyes, roughly crafted in a crude manner that accentuated his barbarian

origins. Rufus, who had no military background at all, was properly intimidated, and he could barely contain his own trembling at the sight.

The prisoners' wailing, loud and desperate in its pleading at first, quickly trailed off into whimpering an hour or so after the *crurifragium*. One by one, their voices fell silent. When only a few were left, some of the witnesses began to bet on which prisoner would last the longest, and the arena was filled with the calls familiar at any horse race or at thanksgiving games. This greatly distressed Rufus, who did not even attempt to conceal his disapproving frowns and sighs. The landlord's obvious discomfort brought to the face of Radamyntos the bare, tight-lipped smile that is the substitute for great laughter among those of his tribe. Thinking that I might trick him into making an unguarded statement in sympathy with Maternus, I asked Rufus for the source of his disquiet. He gave nothing away, but merely replied, "*Dux*, it grieves me to hear the catcalls of the crowd directed at men hanging on the cross, even such scum as these." This struck me as very softhearted, and not a very good reflection on his class, but I could detect nothing politically objectionable in it.

At length, as the sun drew low, only two prisoners survived: one of Maternus' fellow deserters from the legions, a great brute with a square head, and a shriveled old man with spots on his bald pate and the look of boiled leather. This looked to be no contest, and nearly all present expected the legionary to be the last. It surprised us all when his death rattle came just as twilight began to creep down the hillside. Those few who bet on the old man did not have long to cheer or gloat, though, for as soon as he realized he was now without his fellows, his face took on a look of great determination and he began to declaim in a strange tongue, in a strong and piercing voice that was scarcely to be believed possible from one as frail as he at the end of a terrible punishment.

At the sound of that voice Rufus and his fellow landlords, as well as those peasants whose curiosity had drawn them near, blanched with fear. Many of them made obscene hand-gestures

and clutched at some *fascinum* [27] on their person, as if to ward off the evil eye. Some seemed to recognize the strange speech and the particular curse or spell, while some seemed to suffer a more general fear. Certainly the Iazyges did not need to understand the words to recognize a curse when they heard one; they held their formation, but muttered to one another. I thought to call for a ladder and tongs, so that the man's tongue might be struck out, but before I could do so his voice rose to one last great height and then was stilled. His head bobbed about and then hung down on his spindly neck.

After an interval where all stood still, disturbed and hushed in the half-light, I asked if anyone present had understood the dying man's words. Rufus spoke up, with great reluctance.

"*Dux...*" he said, "...the old one was one of those who claimed to be one of the hidden college of druids. Whether he truly was, or merely pretended to be in order to spread fear and to gain a position among the traitors, I cannot say. But in the language of the country, he declared that we were impious to dare to slay him at the beginning of *Samonios*." Before they adopted our civilized calendar, the Gauls celebrated their new year at this time, and also a festival honoring their ancestors and begging

for favors of the dead. [28] "He says that since we have killed him, he will return and lead the vengeance of the dead against us."

Many who were present shuddered to hear this, and held their charms fast yet again. But Radamyntos did not, and I did not. Radamyntos considered that living enemies were better to be feared than dead ones, and I – I, to my regret, thought that the old man was a charlatan or a fool.

His charge of impiety was correct. My respect for the gods has long been a matter of my duty to the state, and has never been truly rooted in my breast. I have always given the gods their bare due but not more; and I have never feared them. In my pride I laughed at the old man's curse though I explained, and showed his corpse my back.

THREE

Our soldiers I sent back to their marching-camp at the tenth milestone, where they joined the two *cohors peditata* [29] and one *cohors alaria* [30] who had not already been sent on to Lutetia [31] following the defeat of the main body of our enemies.

Radamyntos and a tribune, Aulus Furius Pacilus, called Pacilus, accompanied me to the nearby estate of Rufus. Pacilus was not well known to me; he was attached for service to one of the legions of the Rhine frontier, and had been lent to me for the space of this campaign. He was said to be a eloquent dinner-companion, however, and I brought him with me on this occasion to improve our acquaintance. [32]

The land near the road was heavily wooded, with the forests broken only intermittently by clearings for the small tenant farms. Rufus did not directly work his land with the large slave gangs common in areas of heavier settlement, and he did not have more than a modest *villa rustica*. [33] There were many more of the clearings on the south side of the road, where the land sloped down to the river, than on the north, where the land was waste. Rufus surprised me by riding with us; I did not expect that of one as unmilitary as he. [34]

The villa was not a large one for such a substantial landowner, nor was it very sumptuous. It was only a few *stadia* [35] from the road, on top of a low rise. The river below came into view as we climbed; a dark vein in the grey twilight. As we approached the door, I saw that Rufus had no *janitor* [36] and kept his own key. The house was very simple: it had no atrium, but had a single corridor that ran from the front door to the back, lined with doors that led to the bedrooms, kitchen and study. It was the kind of sturdy, unpretentious farmhouse one can find throughout the hinterland of Britannia and Gaul. [37] Servants greeted the master of the house when we entered, but no great number of them; this, perhaps, explained why Rufus did not travel by bearer.

I wondered if Rufus was something of a miser. Although only marginally prosperous, the aristocrats had several estates more luxurious than his, and many men owned large numbers of agricultural slaves. For one of the major landowners of the region to live so humbly, and to refrain from using slaves to increase the yield of his estate, was incongruous.

In the *triclinium* [38] after we had doffed our cloaks and washed our hands an aged and languid slave served us bread and soft cheese from the estate, along with some eggs and greens, and wine without too much water. Had I known how my night was to proceed, I would have eaten more and drunk less.

As we dined, Rufus made general conversation about the local hardships brought on by the late

disturbances, and made polite inquiries about the conditions on the frontiers in Germania and Britannia. I possess no great facility for dinner-chatter, but Pacilus deserved his reputation; he was favored by an urbane polish that his time on the frontiers had not yet worn away. I let the tribune satisfy our host's curiosity in the main. As I idled on the *lectus* ^[39], half listening and half absorbed in my own thoughts, I noticed an oddity: the floor mosaic - a depiction of the abduction of Europa by Zeus in the guise of a white bull, which was quite fine, compared to the rest of the dwelling - was largely covered over by rushes. Had the rushes been fresh and full, and not dried to a thin brown mat, the heat passed to the floor by the hypocaust ^[40], the mosaic might have been totally obscured.

When I asked Rufus for the purpose of the rushes, imagining it to be some custom of Armorica, he informed me that he found the mosaic disturbing; but that he did not have the heart to remove it, it had been a favorite of his father. I let the strangeness of this pass without comment; I am fortunate enough that I become more courteous, and not less, with wine.

Pacilus would have lingered after the apples ^[41], but I was in no mood for *comissatio* ^[42]. The road and the campaign had set an ache in my bones, and Rufus did not strike me as the right host for such an event in any case. Instead, I called for my sandals ^[43] and gave our host the type of gracious but impersonal thanks one gives to a provincial one will likely never see again.

The darkness was advanced when we departed, as it was now several hours after sun-down and there was only the merest sliver of new moon. Rufus lent us one of his farm-boys to carry torches and help lead us back to the road. The night had cooled rapidly, as it will in the northern autumn, and the Archer hung over us in a cloudless and clear sky. The torches lit the breath of our mounts, as we carefully walked them back to the road, but not much else.

Pacilus walked near me, and we talked in low tones. He voiced the opinion that our recent host was a follower of Christ. This suspicion, he related, had grown all through our supper, and he had concealed it from all present only with difficulty. He gave as his evidence the disquiet the man had shown at the crucifixion of the rebels. The Christians, he explained, identify the cross with their gods and are jealous of its application to mere criminals. This also accounted for the rushes that obscured the mosaic; since the Christians were a type of Jew, Pacilus explained, they disdained and hated all gods other than their own, to the point of despising their images, even in art. The tribune thought that we should consider questioning Rufus on this further or making inquiry in the neighborhood, to make sure nothing improper was afoot.

This argument did not persuade me. The behavior of our host at the execution was explained easily enough by the peaceful conditions of life this far from the frontier; a country squire who stayed away from the games at Lugdunum might be expected to blanch at the sight of so many condemned men receiving their punishment. And the Christians were said to be fanatics, who engaged in many strange practices; a fanatic would tear up a mosaic, and not make a half-hearted effort at covering it over. Either way, as far as I was concerned, Pacilus was devoting too much thought to a matter of no import. If some backwoods landowner wanted to dabble in loathsome Eastern mysteries, as long as he was discreet enough to keep it secret it was all the same to me. ^[44]

The forest drew close to the road as we left the cleared ground of the estate behind. Wood sounds surrounded us, and just outside the bobbing circle of torchlight there was a rustling as of deer through the undergrowth. The figures of fellow travelers on the road became dimly visible, as shapes in the blackness ahead. I called out to them, and they did not reply - but neither did they turn or leave the road, as bandits might have done.

We halted for a few moments, to see if they would hail us as they came closer. They did not.

shift in the wind carried to us a weak and thin sound of voices in distress – the sort of low, moaning hum mixed with unintelligible and garbled whispery cries that can come off a fresh battlefield at night.

We drew together, and stood to support the farm-boy, who had taken fright at the sounds and quailed and shook. Radamyntos handed me the reins of his mount, and took one of the torches from the sputtering boy. He strode forward several paces and repeated my road-greeting, insistently and in a great voice. Again there was no reply. Our horses grew nervous and stamped in place; my mount pulled hard at its bridle, and I only held on to the lead with effort.

The figures closed upon us, and in a few more moments came near enough to become just barely visible in the torchlight. At first I took them for lunatics: three men, dressed in torn and filthy tunics smeared with mud and blood and feces, stumbled on the road. They were more disheveled than any decent beggar, with clods of dirt stuck to their skin and hair. Their jaws worked spastically and groaned no more sensible than those of wild beasts came from their mouths.

“To the *crepido* ^[45], beggars!” I bellowed, annoyed at being startled at night by such scum.

Then I noticed that one of them had an arm severed below the elbow, with flesh and skin dangling loosely from the cut.

“You!” Radamyntos cried in recognition at the largest of the figures.

What he meant by this I did not get to ask, because at that moment we were taken in flank. The rustling among the trees had not been deer after all, but more of these madmen. While we had concentrated our attention on the road, they had crept out of the forest and come up on our right, and slightly behind. There were three of them, possibly even filthier than the ones on the road. Two bore obvious wounds: one had a sword-cut to the face, from which half of his cheek hung down as if on a hinge, and one looked to have taken a *contus* in the chest, which had torn away both the lower half of his tunic and part of his ribcage. These great wounds did not prevent them from falling upon the farm-boy, who dropped his torch and screamed. The third madman, less obviously wounded than the others, grappled with Pacilus before he could come to the boy’s aid.

Radamyntos dropped his torch as well, and let out the war cry of his tribe. With both torches rolling on the crown-stones of the road, but neither yet extinguished, the light was much diminished but we could still see. Shadows danced and spun on the road as the madmen in front came forward.

Crazed now by the horrible groans and cries, the horses finally became uncontrollable and fled. Beasts reliable even on the battlefield could not stand before the strangeness on that road. I did not dwell on the loss of the horses long; I could not have kept hold of the bridle and handled my weapons in any event.

I drew my *pugio* ^[46] and rolled it in my right hand. The sword of Radamyntos – a cavalryman’s broadsword, double-edged and with a diamond-section blade – swept into the air, as the decurio prepared the sort of slashing attack he might have employed while mounted. The one-armed madman reached us first, and Radamyntos slashed downward, and the great sword cut through his enemy’s collarbone and exited down near the lungs. This was a killing stroke; if not instantly fatal, the recipient of it should at least have fallen to the ground in shock – but still the madman came on, grasping at Radamyntos’ mailed arm and snarling over his gauntlet.

To our right the screams of the farm-boy rose in pitch with his terror. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that the madmen had dragged him to the ground, and were *biting* at his face and neck as though they were wolves or lions and not men at all. The last of them had fixed his jaws on the arm of Pacilus. The tribune had his *gladius* ^[47] out, and stabbed his opponent in the belly with it again and again, trying to free himself; to little effect.

If men armed with swords could not lay these monsters ^[48] low, I doubted I could do much good with my dagger. I gave the one nearest to me a good shove instead, pushing it backwards as it reached out to pin down an arm of Radamyntos. The cavalryman shook free of his opponent, and lifting his sword high again this time struck for the neck. The blow did not quite decapitate, but came near enough to finally stop the monster's advance.

"Come on then!" Radamyntos shouted at the large one he had earlier seemed to recognize. The recognition was not returned. The monster hissed and moaned and continued its attack, but its eyes showed no awareness. Radamyntos cleaved its skull in two from right to left. This was as effective a stopping blow as the neck-strike had been. The momentum of the sword-cut carried him forward just enough to cause him to stumble, though, and the last of the monsters to our front clambered on his back. I brought the pommel of my *pugio*, which ended in a thick ring, down upon the back of its head with all my weight, and shattered its skull with a loud and painful *crack*.

Pacilus had seen enough of what Radamyntos had done to change his tactics as a result, and brought down the beast that had seized him with a series of hacks to the throat that finally severed its spine.

Even though all their fellows had been dispatched, the remaining monsters continued to rend the poor farm-boy's flesh. Had we been prepared to leave them to it, they would have taken no notice of us at all. The three of us freed the boy with a flurry of angry cuts, but it was too late; the life had gone out of him, there on the road, and his face and neck now resembled a gnawed carcass from a carrion field.

The quiet of the night came back like a cold wind. Pacilus shook his head to clear it, and gestured about us while he declaimed: "He grows a wolf; his hoariness remains – and the same ray in other members reigns." ^[49]

With this Pacilus was revealed to be a man who could quote poetry moments after facing such terrors as we had just seen. I did not know whether to be impressed, or appalled. I had not known I had it in him, and would have leaned on him more and reached out to him in greater friendship the last months had I known. His quip brought a laugh to my lips; from I know not what reserves of dark amusement.

"Did you know these madmen?" I asked Radamyntos, remembering how he had spoken to the other one.

"Aye," he answered, and pointed. "The fat one...I killed him yesterday." He stopped to remove first his helmet, and then one gauntlet, and wiped the sweat from his face with his bared hand. "As we rode up to the villa, he was one of those who stood to face us, to buy time as their friends tried to flee to the wood. I cut him down as he tried to pull me from the saddle."

Radamyntos had good camp-Latin, but still spoke like a barbarian at times. Perhaps he had mistaken what he meant to say. "Surely you did not kill him?" I asked, although I could feel the answer like an icy stone in the pit of my gut. "For here he is."

"No." He was calmly certain. "When I kill a man, I remember him. Believe me."

"I believe you," Pacilus interjected.

"I killed him, and I saw him on the field when his gear was stripped, and I saw him again when the prisoners threw his body with the others in the trash-pit." He shrugged. "He decided he wanted to die again. It is no matter. Let him come a third time, it will be the same."

I gathered up the torches, which remarkably had stayed lit throughout. "We should see to the horses."

Radamyntos shook his head. "Not easy, in this dark."

"We won't have time," Pacilus said, wincing. "Listen. Between the gusts."

I held my head up into the wind and closed my eyes. Just at the edge of hearing, the low moaning hum of voices was still there — but somehow layered, as if there were many more of the creatures, scattered at varying distances.

“Forget the horses,” I said, though it stuck in my throat to say it. “We have to go back to the villa. It’s the only way.”

“What about the boy?” Radamyntos asked.

“Leave him.” I was blunt about it. “There’s no time. And he can’t be helped now.”

Pacilus was aghast. “They...gnawed upon him.” He winced again, both from disgust and from the bite wound in his arm. “We can’t leave him in the open.” Radamyntos nodded to reinforce the tribune’s point; he was equally hesitant to leave.

I was not about to risk a tribune and a decurion to salvage the corpse of a farm slave, and I told them so in no uncertain terms. Despite having the right of it, I had to be quite severe. They both grumbled, but finally each took a torch from me and we reluctantly started to retrace our way. Angry, horror-struck, reason nearly overthrown by prodigy and omen, we staggered back down the road in the dark.

FOUR

I made a vow to Diana Trivia ^[50] when we came again to the track that led from the road to the villa. Often enough I had doubted the use of such vows in the past, but in that cold-bitten darkness I thought no appeal for aid to be not worth the attempt.

As we found our way back over our steps the cries in the distance waxed and waned in number and were now closer, now farther. Every spot of ground where two black and bare trees came together to our eyes loomed in the dark as a potential site for an ambush. The ditches and hedges marking off the fields made a veritable *clades Variana*. ^[51] The cries of the sows from the large pigsty maintained by Rufus disturbed us so much that we dithered long before it and had to force ourselves to walk on.

When we reached the villa at last, I surveyed the building with an eye for its defensive value. It was good, solid stone and mortar, and not just pounded and plastered earth and timber like many of the houses in the north. Several of the windows were covered by iron grilles, but some of them had ornate jointed wooden shutters.

We pounded on the door for some time before the servants appeared, followed by a mystified master of the house. The commotion created by our return was such that I had to shout for silence to still it. We pushed our way into the corridor and barred the door behind us.

“We were waylaid on the road,” I said, not immediately knowing what else I should or could say, or how to explain what we had lately seen.

“Where is Florus?” our host asked.

“Dead,” I replied. I had not known his name.

“Was it the rebels?” Rufus choked. It was clear that he had felt affection for this servant and met our news with grief. Even by the flickering light of a single wick ^[52], I could read the anguish on his face.

Pacilus laughed bitterly at this question. “You might say that,” he replied.

I glared at him.

“We don’t know who or what we met on the road,” I declared firmly. Now that we had the security of walls about us, I regretted my earlier fear. I did not want to make any demonstration of panic that could be used to reproach us later.

Pacilus and Radamyntos would have none of it.

“Aye, it was the rebels,” Radamyntos puffed. “Their corpses, ^[53] anyway. Stalking the roads and the wood in the night.”

“*Miastores*,” ^[54] Pacilus interceded emphatically. He was not going to be cautious in his

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