VENATOR

ROMAN EQUESTRIAN I

A·M·SWINK



HISTORIUM PRESS

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FOR MY MOTHER,
WHO HAS ALWAYS BELIEVED IN ME

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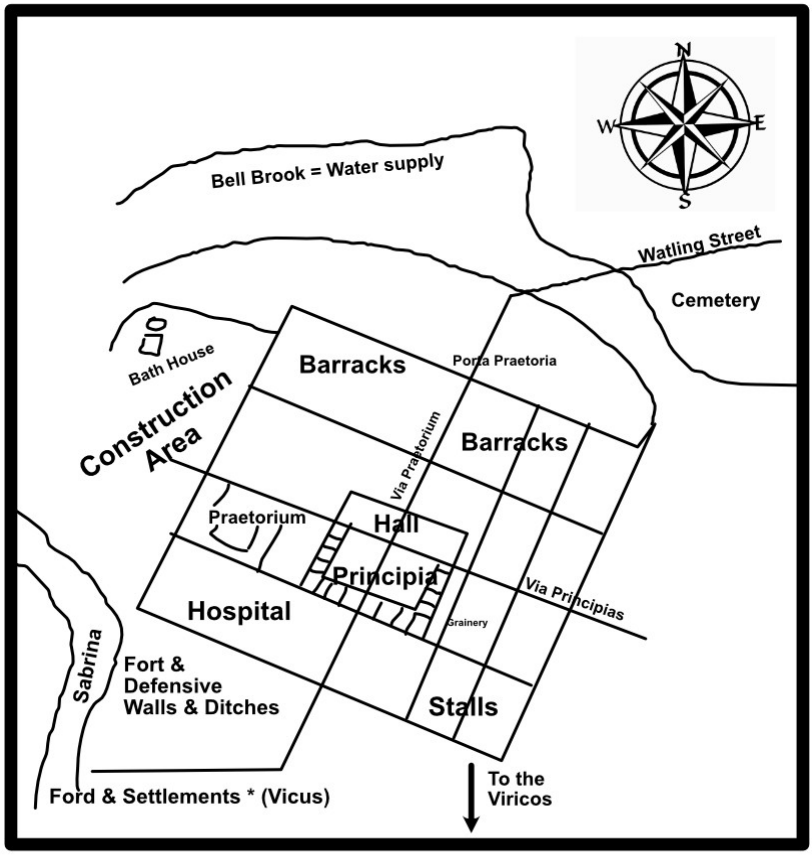
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BRITANNIA
MID-1ST CENTURY



VIRCONIUM CA· AD 57-85

Dramatis Personae

Romans

Leucus Decimus Maximus:	Primus Pilus, Legio XIIII Gemina
Publius Tullius Servius:	Optio to Centurion Decimus
Marcus Afranius Regulus:	Legate, Legio XIIII Gemina
Paulus Junius Fortunatus:	Second Spear, Legio XIIII Gemina
Gaius Octavius Corvus:	Camp Prefect, Legio XIIII Gemina
Publius Julianus Titianus:	Tribunus Laticlavius, Legio XIIII Gemina
Tiberius Claudius Tirintius:	Decurion, 1st Thracian Cavalry
Titus Flaminius:	Aquilifer, Legio XIIII Gemina
Bellius Plancus:	Signifer, 1st Cohort, Legio XIIII Gemina
Appius Rufinius Persius:	Centurion, 5th century, 1st Cohort, Legio XIIII Gemina
Albus:	Centurion, 3rd Century, 1st Cohort, Legio XIIII Gemina
Sextus:	Centurion, 4th Century, 1st Cohort, Legio XIIII Gemina
Isidorus:	Tesserarius, 1st Century, 1st Cohort, Legio XIIII Gemina
Gaius Suetonius Paulinus:	Imperial Governor of Britannia
Vulso, Valerius, Ponticus, Valentinus, Unimanus, Falto:	Legionaries, 1st Century, 1st Cohort, Legio XIIII Gemina
Catullus:	Legionary Aide to Legate Regulus
Sextus Cincinnatus:	Pompous palace boy; favourite of Emperor Nero
Cato:	Personal slave of Centurion Decimus; a Gaul
Livius:	Personal slave of Tribune Titianus

Nicomedes:	Personal slave of Optio Servius; a Greek
Gaius Nerfinius:	A Latin tutor with dubious tastes
Aquila:	Personal mount of Centurion Decimus
Nero:	Personal mount of Optio Servius
Rhesus:	Personal mount of Decurion Tirintius

Britons

Luciana/Luigsech:	Princess of the Cornovii tribe
Timoteo/Tiernan:	Prince of the Cornovii tribe
Gruffydd:	Chieftain of the Cornovii tribe
Gwenfrewi:	Queen of the Cornovii tribe
Arthmael:	Chieftain of the Silure tribe
Morcant:	Son of Arthmael; prince of the Silure tribe
Catraoine:	Cornovii woman; friend of Gwenfrewi
Brocknus:	A skilled hunter; member of the Regni tribe
Belena:	Close friend and personal mount of Luciana
Carr and Tor:	Trained wolfhounds; property of Brocknus

In the Vicus

Cassia:	Prostitute; Decimus's oldest friend; a Gaul
Charis:	Madam of Cassia's brothel; a Greek
Bakari:	Proprietor of a wine shop; an Aegyptian
Cook:	Charis's property; sees and hears everything
An Ex-Legionary:	Proprietor of The Aurochs
His Daughter:	A girl who finds herself in a troubling situation

Pronunciation Guide

Amyntas	AH-meen-tas
Aquila	ah-KEE-lah
Arthmael	ARTH-MAIL
Atrebates	ah-trey-bah-tez
Bakari	buh-kah-ree
Belena	buh-leh-nuh
Belgae	BEL-gih
Beltaine	buhl-TAYN
Brida	BREE-duh
Brigantes	bre-GAN-tez
Camulodunum	KAH-moo-lawd-oo-num
Caratacus	kah-RAT-uh-kuz
Cartimandua	kar-tih-man-DOO-ah
Carvetii	car-vet-ee
Catraoine	cuh-trow-in
Cernunnos	kair-NUH-nohs
Charis	KAER-his
Cornovii	kor-noh-wee
Danu	DA-noo
Deceangli	deck-anh-lee
Demetae	deh-MEE-tay
Dumnonii	duh-nom-nee
Durotriges	dur-OH-trih-guz
Epona	uh-POH-nuh
Fogamur	FOH-ah-mahr
Gaesatae	guh-say-ree
Gemina	GEH-mih-nuh
Gesoriacum	guh-so-REE-ah-coom
Gruffydd	GRIF-IDH
Gwenfrewi	GWEHNVReh-Wiy
Iceni	ai-SEE-nai
Isca	ISS-kah
Llewyn	LOO-when

Lugh	LOO
Luigsech	LEE-sak
Manduessedum	MAHN-doo-ess-eh-dum
Morcant	MOR-CAHNT
Nicomedes	NEE-koh-meh-dez
Ordovices	or-doh-veh-suz
Prasutagus	prah-SOO-tah-gus
Regni	reg-NEE
Samhain	SAW-when
Samos	SAW-mohs
Silures	SEE-lurh-ez
Sophonisba	sah-fon-EEZ-bah
Taranis	TERR-ah-nis
Teutoberg	TOO-toh-burg
Tiernan	TEER-nan
Tirintius	TYE-ren-tee-us
Titianus	tee-SEE-ai-noos
Venutius	whe-NOO-tee-us
Viricio	weer-EE-kee-oh
Viricos	where-ih-kos
Viroconium	wee-roh-cohn-ee-um
Xenophon	ZEH-nuh-fin

PART ONE

SAMOS



I

Viroconium, British Frontier, AD 59

'Centurion, to what do I owe this pleasure?'

Decimus Maximus slung his helmet, resplendent with its brilliant red transverse crest, to the floor. He lifted a hand in protest at the woman who moved towards him. 'Sit down, Cassia. It's not that sort of call.'

Cassia pouted and flung herself back against the ornate silken pillows and Persian carpets that adorned her room. She unpinned her shoulder-length, silky blonde hair and patted the billowing folds of her rather exotically coloured and provocatively cut gown. 'You might have humoured me for a little while. It's a rare day when I ever draw any business. I'm not getting any younger, you know.'

'Nonsense.' The ghost of a smile flashed across the grizzled centurion's face. 'You look as young as you did the day you landed in this forsaken country.'

Cassia laughed, eyeing him in approbation as he sat down beside her. He bore little resemblance to the curly-headed youth who'd used to chase her around the teeming streets of Rome, or even the junior centurion who'd first planted his feet in Britannia sixteen years before. Lines had begun to crack his sharp, campaign-weathered face; his dark, close-cropped hair that peaked just over his forehead in ringlets had become streaked with grey; the full, trim beard he'd sprouted over the years was likewise almost as white as it was brown. Cassia lifted a hand and tenderly fingered the leather shoulder straps of his cuirass. Despite their effect, the intervening years had done little to weaken her affection for the young lad in Rome who'd stolen her heart. 'Oh, Decimus. You're too kind.'

He gently took her wrist and lowered it back to her lap. 'I told you, I have no need of your services. I'm not getting any younger, either; I don't feel those kinds of urges anymore.'

Her bright blue eyes clouded over as she curled back. 'Homesick again?' She asked flatly, already knowing the answer.

Decimus reclined stiffly against her plump cushions, feeling his studded jerkin catch and chafe against the delicately embroidered designs. 'You know me all too well.' He smiled and flicked a finger over an ornamental tassel. 'I was just happening to think about that night when The Senator was entertaining, and we climbed over the pasture fence to play around his vineyards in the moonlight.'

Cassia giggled. 'The Senator's parties were such a bore!'

'Yes, but we made our own fun.' Decimus cast his eyes through her shuttered window, reeling back the years in his mind.

Cassia sighed, remembering their wild dashes up and down the orderly hedges in an enthusiastic game of chase. 'I'll never forget the whipping I got for the hole you put through that trellis you tried to scale!'

He shook his head, his jaw tightening. One hand lifted from his lap, where it had been idly fingering his baltea, and hardened into a fist. He could still picture The Senator's bland, impassive face watching on from the comfort of his triclinium as the houseboy flayed Cassia's backside. 'I ought to have beaten him for that.'

Cassia shuddered. She couldn't help but draw back, repelled, as the man fell away and the soldier assumed his place. The steel in his gaze chilled her spine. 'You were a child,' she whispered, eyes wide. 'You couldn't.'

To her relief, he softened and shot her a rueful smile. 'Right. Still, you were my best mate.'

'Don't worry.' She crawled into his lap and curled her heavily scented arms around his stout, grimy neck. 'You'll make it up to me when you retire from the army.'

'Mmm,' he grunted absently. Cassia frowned as he looked away. *I won't let you forget about that promise, Centurion.* She massaged his shoulders, digging to pinch the skin hidden beneath layered chain mail, leather, and linen. She'd worked hard enough to earn a retirement of ease far away from the muddy shores of the Sabrina.

She began to run her fingers through his sweaty, helmet-plastered locks. A deep sigh issued from within his chest. She tried to meet his gaze, but the glassy, distant look had returned to his eyes. Cassia frowned. She didn't know what dark paths his mind sometimes traced, but she was tired of losing her friend to those shadows. 'Oh, just forget about the past, already, Decimus! Rome won't remain a distant memory for long.'

He sighed happily. The joy creasing his stern, angular features had nothing to do with Cassia's gentle ministrations. 'Two more campaigns. Just two more campaigns and I can finally return to Rome. Rome! Where the sun always shines and the water's as blue as the sky.' He beamed a longing smile at the plain thatched ceiling of Cassia's room, seeing nothing but the

beautiful city he yearned to return to.

'Yes,' Cassia breathed, contenting herself once again to pretending to be the source of his happiness as she pressed her cheek to his ear. 'Two more campaigns in this shithole and the three of us will be back in Rome with a decent living: you, me, and Cato.'

Decimus's face fell, his daydream broken by the mention of his attendant. 'I haven't seen that blighted brother of yours since this morning. Just where has he gotten off to, do you think?'

Cato sat on the grassy bank outside the fortifications, idly polishing one of his master's bridles. The neat, orderly rows of the legion's barracks sat behind the tall wooden walls at his back. To his right, a straight, clay-lined channel ferreted water from the northern brook, diverting a stream gently downhill into the cistern located just inside the fort. Beyond the bend in the brook, he could make out the scattered stones comprising the fort's cemetery. Members of the legion, their slaves, and other members of the vicus had committed their ashes to those mossy green banks.

He sighed. Even the freedom granted those slaves in death was better than no freedom at all.

Cato paused to wipe his grimy hand on his pale blue tunic before running it through his wavy, wheat-coloured hair. His pert, snub little nose with its light smattering of freckles and his full, expressive lips scrunched into a scowl. He twisted in the grass and watched the legionary patrolman walking the fort's palisade pass back and forth. Aside from a couple of stray looks, the soldier largely ignored him. Grunting, he turned away in disgust.

Like his sister, Cato was a Gaul; his features did not resemble a Roman's in the slightest. But, unlike his sister, he had chafed against his slave's collar from the moment of his birth. He had not been able to buy his freedom with sexual favours the way Cassia had. And, though Decimus was by no means as cruel a master as The Senator had been, Cato had had his fill of being ordered around.

Why should he have to wait around while others decided his fate? Why had he spent his entire life letting others order him around? Why wasn't he ever put to a useful enough trade to earn his freedom? Why did his sister lead such an easier life than him? And *why* couldn't he just pluck up the urge to run away?

The image of the Senator's ancient houseboy leapt to his mind. The old man's son, born into The Senator's household a decade before Cato himself, had attempted to run away at the age of fifteen. He'd been caught by the vigiles and returned ten days later. The Senator had made Cato,

Cassia, and the other slave children line up to watch the teenager lose his fifth fingers to the burning forge before receiving a branded 'F' on his forehead. The mingled screaming and smells of burning, cauterised flesh, combined with the visceral imagery of the young slave's mutilation, haunted Cato's childhood dreams for years.

He tossed the bridle aside and kicked a sandaled foot at a stone sitting in the grass. He watched it bounce slowly down the knoll and drop into the cistern stream with a ping.

'Shirking again, eh, Cato?'

He lifted his head to see Livius, Tribune Julianus Titianus's man, grinning down at him from a few feet away. He cut short the retort that had been building in his throat, eyes widening at the sight. Livius stood proudly, his expression almost as lofty as his master's. His fine white tunic, belted at the waist, didn't sport the holes and tears at its hem like Cato's dingy blue number. A dark cloak, gifted to him by his master to better endure the British winters, flapped softly in the breeze behind him. These Cato hardly noticed. It was the gleaming, heavy silver collar ringing the slave's olive-hued neck that arrested his attention.

'Where in Jupiter's name did you get that?'

'Get what?' Livius grinned. He watched Cato rise from the grass and lean close to inspect the collar. 'Oh, this?' He brushed his fingers against it absently. 'It's just a heathen torc.'

Cato studied it closely. The silver torc, though solid, consisted of an intricate weaving of bands that formed a knotted pattern. The curved ends were festooned with gleaming, carved figures of snarling hounds. Their jewelled eyes sparkled even in the overcast gloom. 'It looks like a king's torc,' Cato breathed admiringly.

'Near enough. I took it from the chieftain of the Deceangli.'

'When?'

'After the battle, you nitwit.' Livius shot him a haughty look. 'He had no more use for it, and it seemed a shame to let it be buried in the pit with his corpse. I presented it to the Tribune, but he told me to keep it.' He shook his head. 'Really, Cato, you ought to stay closer to the rear guard when the army engages with these tribes. There's all manner of treasures to be found if you're the first on the scene.'

'Looting bodies, you mean.' Cato drew back, scowling again.

Livius shrugged. 'What you call looting, I call opportunity. If you weren't so busy cowering by the baggage waggons, you might have found enough treasures to buy your freedom.'

'I do not cower!' Cato's blue eyes flashed angrily. 'The centurion orders me to stay well to the rear until he sends for me!'

'And since when did you ever care for following the centurion's orders?' Livius rolled his eyes before strolling away.

Cato stood in the grass, clenching and unclenching his fists, as he watched the slave stalk back to the fort. Slowly, he stooped down and picked up his master's bridle before turning to follow. He took a few reluctant steps, not caring that he dragged the newly polished leather through the mud.

'Cato!'

He stopped and lifted his head. The vertical black and white horsehair crest of an optio's helmet appeared in the distance, bobbing towards him. Below its visor, the grim, lined face of Publius Tullius Servius became visible as it drew near. 'Where is your master?'

He shrugged. 'How should I know?' Bored, he made a move towards the fort again. Tullius's arm reached out and stopped him.

'Hold it, boy! The legate's been screaming for him! Surely you must know!'

The slave shook his head irritably. 'Check Charis's establishment! I expect he's in bed with my whore of a sister.'

On the banks opposite the ford of the river Sabrina, facing the fort's southern wall, Charis's boarding house stood tucked between a weaver's shopfront and the alley lining a rather seedy tavern called The Aurochs. The front of its limewashed wall boasted a roster of "exotic girls from all corners of the empire," punctuated with graffito left by its male patrons. These included Helena ("good lay"), Sophonisba ("long legs"), Euphemia ("goes all night") and Kottyto (who, according to one disgruntled customer, "has warts"). A hulking Dalmatian doorman glowered from the porticoed entrance, scowling at the scarlet-clad soldiers seeking Charis's advertised treasures.

Once inside, a man needed to avoid the carousing drunks and dancing women performing on tables, chairs, and laps, skirt past the drawn curtains of the cells located in quiet corners behind the bar and make his way up the narrow staircase to a hall of rooms partitioned off by heavy wooden doors.

There, behind the farthest of the doors, Cassia reclined against Decimus on her bed, gently feeding him dates from a bronze dish. 'The chariot races at the Circus Maximus,' she intoned, stroking his wiry chin while he dreamily gazed at the ceiling. 'All the bright colours of the ponies sweeping past, the balls raising on the post with each lap, the excited cheers of the crowd…'

He smiled, absently rolling the candied fruit around in his mouth. 'The

smell of the citruses that horrible little man kept trying to hawk to the cheap seats. That loud supporter of the Greens with the squeaky voice daring anyone with money on the Blues to try and take him on. The stable lads scurrying across the track with their pitchforks. Emperor Tiberius watching from the imperial box, the Praetorian Guard surrounding him.'

Decimus recoiled from his daydream long enough to lean over and spit the date's pit onto the wooden floor. When he lifted his head, he caught sight of the dark, nervous eyes of a Syrian girl hovering in the doorway. 'Oh, hello.'

Cassia turned her head and shot the girl an irritated look. 'Yes, Marina, what is it?'

'Begging your pardon,' she murmured in heavily accented Latin. She dipped her head towards the officer. 'There's a man outside for the centurion. He says it's urgent.'

Decimus gruffly picked Cassia up off his lap and dropped her aside. 'Duty calls.' He grabbed his helmet with its accompanying felt skullcap and clapped it over his head as he followed the small, dark prostitute towards the door.

'Tullius!' He caught sight of his optio's face as soon as he emerged outside. The optio's dark eyes were furrowed within the gathered lines of his face as he stood, shifting uneasily from foot to foot. Decimus frowned. 'What's happened?'

'I'm glad I found you, sir. The legate's fit to be tied.' He turned and started leading the way down the hall. Decimus fell into step beside him. 'Do you remember that cavalry patrol that went missing two days ago?'

'Yes, what about them?'

Tullius swallowed grimly. 'I think you'd better see for yourself.'

They tramped down to the first level, cut through the hazy kitchen at the back of the brothel, and exited through the courtyard to the alley alongside The Aurochs. Decimus frowned at Tullius's set shoulders, wondering what might have occurred.

Since arriving at the fort seven years ago, Legio Quatturodecimae Gemina had seen precious little action; the local British tribe was content to pay the governor's taxes and stay out of the legion's way. There had been disquiet among the Brigantes to the north, but the Ninth legion was seeing to them. Building projects, such as roads and sewers, were progressing at an agreeable pace. The largest hindrance to the army's engineers had thus far been the mercurial island weather. As a result of the army's works, the vicus down by the ford had grown with each successive year of occupation. Occasional raids and hunting parties from the southern tribes sometimes troubled the locals, who fell on the legion to settle their disputes. Some

punitive action had been taken in the south alongside the Twentieth legion, but the natives in their roundhouses and hillforts had been little match for the might of Rome's disciplined killing machine. While several tribes remained hostile to their presence on the frontier, no meaningful resistance had been mounted since their invasion. Decimus saw no reason things should suddenly change now.

They turned left at the end of the road and began cresting the straight track up the rise to the fort's south gate. At their backs, the docks and warehouses lining the Sabrina faded behind the shapes of wooden homes and businesses belonging to natives, immigrants, and soldiers alike. Tullius's steps began to hasten to the double march. Decimus practically had to jog to keep up with them. He looked beyond the optio's black-and-white crest to the high walls of the wooden palisade. Legionaries stationed along the gate silently watched the approach of the two senior officers.

'Labruscum,' Tullius grunted to the gate guards. He grinned over his shoulder at Decimus as they passed under the heavy, reinforced watchtower that defended the gate. 'Tribune Titianus must be missing his vineyards again.'

Decimus shook his head; he didn't have time to waste thinking about the tribune. 'Now, what's so sensitive you couldn't tell me before? Where's Legate Regulus?'

Tullius grimly pointed up the via praetorium. They continued their steps past the stable blocks, where the auxiliary cohorts barracked, and the legionary hospital.

The hulking complex of temple, offices, gathering hall, and supply buildings comprising the principia loomed before them. They stood out from the surrounding wooden structures, as they'd been replaced with limewashed brick walls and tile roofs. As the most important building complex within the fort, the principia shared this more permanent build with only the legate's quarters thus far; the rotating building crew was working on steadily replacing the wooden barracks of the first cohort with brick walls. The forbidding, porticoed façade of the praetorium stretched out ahead on the officers' left. To their right, the wooden granary on its raised platform looked pitiful by comparison.

The pair took a sharp left at the principia and marched past the praetorium. Slaves sweeping and spinning along the portico paused to shoot Decimus a nervous look as he passed. A feeling of unease rankled in the pit of the centurion's stomach. Whatever Regulus needed to see him for, it couldn't be good.

The legionaries stationed along the western palisade stopped and clapped their fists to their shoulders in stiff salute as Decimus and Tullius

approached. The gate guards looked ashen under their helmet brims, backs rigidly against the wooden doors opening onto a construction yard. Here sat the bricks, tiles, and timbers being used to improve the buildings inside the fort's walls. Hulking blocks of dusty concrete and buckets of limewash lent the grounds a hazy, dirty white sheen. Gravel crunched under the officers' hobnailed boots, oddly loud in the silence of the normally bustling yard.

They came across the legate, red-faced and huffing, behind a tall stack of bricks just outside the gates. His vertical scarlet helmet crest quivered with rage. His impassive, stonelike features seemed etched of the very materials surrounding him. Red brick dust hung about his lorica, lending the medals on his harness a dull sheen. 'If it isn't my primus pilus! It's about time they tracked you down! Look at what Fortunatus's crew found,' Regulus gestured with his arm expansively. 'Just what in Tartarus do you make of that?!'

Decimus marched up to the edge of the yard and stopped short. His shoulders drooped as he breathed a weary sigh. 'Mithras preserve us.'

The heads of the ten cavalrymen sat on spikes ringing a knoll on the edge of the construction yard. A piece of heavy woollen cloth, attached to the decurion's helmet, fluttered gently in the breeze. An arm band tied to the end of the rag bore the insigne of the Cornovii.