

King Arthur: Dragon's Child

M. K. Hume

Published by Headline Review

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Copyright © 2009 M. K. Hume

The right of M. K. Hume to be identified as the Author of
the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in Great Britain in 2009
by HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

First published in paperback in Great Britain in 2009
by HEADLINE REVIEW

1

Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication
may only be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form, or by any
means, with prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the
case of reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of
licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

All characters – other than the obvious historical figures – in this
publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7553 4867 1 (B format)
ISBN 978 0 7553 5643 0 (A format)

Typeset in Golden Cockerel by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable
products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging
and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the
environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

CHAPTER I

THE EDGES OF MEMORY

‘For a certain order embraces all things, and anything which departs from the order planned and assigned to it, only falls back into order, albeit a different order so as not to allow anything to chance in the realms of Providence.’

Boethius

The forest embraced the boy like an ancient cloak, ragged at the hems, but still serviceable and strong in the weave. The roots of the oak trees twisted out of the deep, mouldering earth, and their branches were so thick and tangled that the boy felt as if he had plunged into cool, green water after the humid brilliance of the fallow fields. The threat that this adventure would lead to stern punishment meant little to him, for he would be punished anyway. If not for these hours of sensual pleasure, then some half-forgotten sin would stir his foster-father to wrath.

In a dense canopy of alder and oak, the trees starved all grass of the necessities of life. The boy walked through a perilous coverlet of leaf drifts, fallen branches embroidered with the verdigris of moss and strange, fleshy flowers that covered hidden badger setts. The eerie beauty of this half-lit world fascinated the boy and set his heart racing with the promise of danger. Anything could dwell in these sudden hollows of almost midnight blue. Within the shadows, anyone could be close



enough to touch him in this half-imagined landscape where his foster-father's power was reduced to less than dust. He himself could be anyone, and he could dream whatever he chose without hindrance. Here, he was neither safe nor unsafe, but most truly himself.

The boy found a favoured natural glade, some ten spear shafts across, where tree trunks mimicked pillars and a slender blade of light reached to the forest floor. A great rock, covered in white lacy lichen, squatted off centre in the glade, and the boy ran his narrow hands over its surface until he felt the worn whorls and lines roughly hacked into its flank. For some half-instinctive reason, he chose to seat himself as far from those barely visible patterns as he could while he stared hard at a hollow, barely the length of his hand, which had been chipped out of the rock at its centre. It was tilted strangely, for the boy had once sacrificed a little liquid from his goatskin water carrier to fill that shallow, manmade cup. He had watched transfixed as some of the water drained away, following the spirals and whorls until the rivulet fell on to the forest floor.

Something dark always flexed its wings in the boy's mind when he touched that hollow. He could imagine a sticky, viscous thread of blood snaking away from his fingers into the pattern, and filling his nostrils with the unsettling scent of iron.

'Things have died here,' he whispered to break the sepulchral silence of the glade. 'But they are so old . . . perhaps as ancient as the trees themselves.'

He loved to frighten himself with his imaginings, even though he was a sturdy boy who was taller than his birth age of twelve years. Already the shape of manhood was coming upon him, and he drove the Saxon serving woman, old Frith, half crazy as he outgrew his leather trousers and strained the stitches of his tunics at the shoulders.

'A great lump of a boy,' his foster-father explained to the

occasional visitor. 'Half wild as well ... a little wanting, if you take my meaning.'

The master, Lord Ector, was himself tall and broad in shoulder and girth, but Lump, as the kitchen slaves called the boy derisively, threatened to tower well over six feet in height.

'A little barbarian,' his foster-brother would drawl to his friends, from his advanced age of seventeen and the impregnable reality of full manhood. 'He scarcely uses the baths – and his hair! Once his beard grows, he'll be a walking mop!'

The young men laughed, for Caius aped the airs of an aristocratic dilettante, although the Dracos Legion, the last to protect Britain, had been gone for many years. Roman by birth, as he described himself with pride, Caius had no time for Lump, who appeared to have none of the true blood in his veins. Caius conveniently ignored his own Celtic paternity.

'Why my pater accepted him defies imagination.'

Caius smoothed his shining black hair which he kept militarily short and carefully curled over his forehead.

'When he was an infant, he cried constantly until the women put him in a linen chest. Then, when he grew older ... well, look at that vacuous face. He's learned his letters, it's true, for Mater would not tolerate an ignorant son, foster or no, but he never reads the scrolls or conducts himself as a well-born youth should. Targo beats him regularly, for all the effect it has on him, for Lump just stands and takes the blows with that vague expression on his fat face.'

Caius and his Celt father, Ector, were wrong.

The boy read the scrolls in the meagre scriptorium, but only when the rest of the house was asleep and he could steal a little oil for his lamp. The flickering light made the Latin words dance with a life quite apart from the ancient memories they shared with him. But he had eaten the stale crusts of charity for every day of his twelve years, and they made an unpalatable and

indigestible meal, scrolls or no scrolls.

So Lump simply *went away* whenever he chose – either to the woods or to the deepest caverns in his head.

The boy stretched his long, smooth legs on the rock's spine. What hair his body grew was certainly very pale, so his limbs were burned to a rich bronze by hours in the sunlight. His face was neither fat nor featureless, but was broad and already sharply angular at the cheekbones. His hair curled so wildly that no amount of combing could completely tame the spiralled ringlets that formed a red-gold nimbus around his head. His eyes were unusual in a world of largely brown, hazel, green and black-eyed people, slaves and masters both, for they were so pale and grey that they seemed almost blind in his smooth face.

Those eyes trapped the light, but nothing of the soul behind them escaped as a warning to those who would torment him.

With regret, the boy left the glade as the blades of light narrowed, then slid behind the dense foliage that towered above him. The air had a sultry heaviness, as if a storm was coming. He would have welcomed the steady driving rain from a downpour, but his empty stomach was warning him that he must return to the villa – or else go hungry for yet another night.

'Farewell, rock,' he whispered to the body-warmed stone. 'Farewell, trees.'

Arriving in the forest was always more pleasant than returning to the villa. As the boy pushed his way through the waist-high grasses of the western field, avoiding the stinging nettles that grew in dense patches, he put on his 'family face' as he called it, and assumed his accustomed untidy shamle.

When he reached the outbuildings of the Villa Poppinidii, his back was bowed and his feet scuffed the crazy stone pathways between the stables and the piggery.

'You're wanted, Lump,' a pert housemaid giggled at him as she

emptied slops into the swine trough. 'You've been wanted for hours. The master has visitors.'

'Ugh!' was the boy's only reply.

Now he would have to bathe. He'd need to find a clean tunic as well, if Frith had found the time to mend his second-best clothing.

He eyed his filthy toes in their ragged sandals with ill humour. He'd be late – and Ector would not tolerate a tardy foster-son.

I'd best be moving then, the boy admonished himself with little enthusiasm. He sought out Frith in the kitchens where she was most usually seated, warming her old bones.

'It's a good thing I am fond of you, young rascalion,' the old woman mumbled through her broken teeth. 'I've mended your tunic and found you a leather belt to fit that waist of yours. And don't forget the perfumed oil,' she called out after him. 'Perhaps it will train that hair of yours – it's full of twigs.'

'I thank you, good Frith,' he called back over his shoulder. 'Sleep well by your fire.'

'That Lump will never amount to much,' the sour-faced cook snapped as he fiddled with a brimming pot filled with boiled eels and root vegetables.

'Ah, but it's amazing how balanced his temper is when he is treated with kindness,' Frith replied tartly. 'It's also remarkable how agile the boy becomes when he thinks no one is looking.' She had been nurse to the last Roman child born to the House of Poppinidii, the sweet and tiny Livinia, and she knew all the secrets of the villa.

'Go back to sleep, Grandmother. You've been out in the sun too long,' was the cook's acerbic reply.

Pausing only in his narrow, airless cubicle to gather up his clothing, his old strigil and a small bottle of rather rancid oil, the

boy ran to the very end of the east wing of Villa Poppinidii, taking care to skirt the atrium, the eating couches and the scriptorium in his haste. In truth, the boy loved to hear stories of the world beyond the villa, which only visitors brought. For him, a little scrubbing was a small price to pay for a night in the corner, listening to the men talk of strange and alien places.

Hastily, in the mosaic pool of the calidarium, the boy stripped and heated his skin in the hot water. He had scant regard for the proper civilities and order of the bathing rites, but concentrated on opening the pores of his skin, rubbing in the sickly oil while he tried not to breathe the stench in through his nose. The boy then dragged the old strigil over several days of accumulated dirt. He even paid cursory attention to his nails so that, eventually, the worst of the day's excesses were removed.

Then, after a quick splash in the frigidarium to cleanse and close his pores, he gave himself a rough towelling and attempted to tie back his wet, wild hair with a leather thong. Finally, he donned a tunic, belt, loincloth and sandals, and ran through the silent colonnades to the room where all visitors were entertained.

'There you are, boy,' Ector snapped. 'At least we must be grateful that you are clean.' He smiled at his guests to soften the effect of his harsh words. 'And now you can assist with the serving,' he ordered. 'As is your duty.'

Ector was a big man, thick in the body and broad of shoulder, but his legs were unnaturally short and bandy. His face was florid and almost smooth of wrinkles, for the master of the house rarely fell prey to extremes of emotion. His mouth was good-humoured and his pale, blue eyes were slightly protuberant, giving his face an expression of perpetual surprise.

But only a fool underestimated Master Ector, a man raised in the warrior tradition, to which the hard muscle of his body bore

witness. Having served his time in the fortresses of the north, Ector now enjoyed his broad acres, his fat cattle and kine and the peace of a quiet middle age. However, should external peril threaten his house, like an old battle hound Ector would rise to fight with merciless glee.

Ector and his wife, Livinia, their son, Caius, and three unknown gentlemen were all reclining in the Roman fashion on carved couches around a low table that was piled high with delicacies. Eel in aspic, a boar's head splendidly presented with boiled barley, a sliced haunch of venison, salted vegetables and periwinkles that swam in exotic sauces were displayed on the low, central table.

The dining room was quite large, as befitted the honour of Livinia's ancient family, and gave directly on to the atrium where, under a pale moon, water danced and splashed from an imaginative bronze statue of a monstrous fish. Sweet-smelling oils burned brightly in rare glass vessels, and the best torches hung on heavy iron wall brackets, yet no unsightly stains of oil smoke marred a fine fresco of an olive grove. Ector might be a bastard Celt, but he had married the last child of an ancient family, and had taken the Poppinidii name as his own. In the nearest town of Aquae Sulis, he was deemed to be a man of significant wit – and extraordinary luck.

'Yes, Foster-Father,' the boy replied neutrally, then bowed formally to each guest, even the hateful Caius.

He sought out the villa's steward, a Greek slave called Cletus, and collected large jars of honeyed wine from Gaul and the crisp, clean vintages of Spain. Ector was noted as a connoisseur of good wines, and it was the boy's task at these functions to ensure that the gilded cups of the visitors were kept full to the brim.

The boy was also adept at becoming invisible. As the meal progressed, his presence was soon forgotten.

‘What news from the east, Myrddion?’ Ector asked with no little interest.

‘The wolves from over the narrow sea come to pillage almost every spring,’ a thin-faced man answered. ‘Fortunately, the barbarians rarely venture far inland, but I fear one day they will arrive with their women and their broods and build their own settlements.’

‘Then they will die here,’ Caius drawled in a way that he believed showed his sophistication.

‘Perhaps,’ the man called Myrddion replied vaguely.

‘Oh, come, Myrddion. What are a few savages to us? Londinium, Eburacum, and Camulodunum are heavily fortified, and the native legions are well trained. We’ll smash any naked barbarians like roaches.’ Ector plucked up a sliver of venison with a dainty knife.

Another stranger, notable for the long brown plaits that hung from his forehead, suppressed a grim laugh.

‘I don’t think anything amusing was said, Luka,’ Ector retorted, his face flushing under what was left of his chestnut hair.

‘My pardon, friend Ector,’ Luka replied. ‘I meant no offence – but these little toys,’ he paused, and made the eating dagger spin in his neat hands, ‘are no match for the war axes of the barbarians. Their swords are almost of your height – and they have iron, too, my brother.’

Caius began to speak, but Livinia quelled him with an imperial lifting of her narrow brows.

‘There is no offence taken, Luka. I served with your father on the Wall, and we shared the same wet nurse for some seasons in Lavatrae. We both grew tall hearing the horror tales of Boedicca of the Iceni and the nearness of her victory when she rebelled against Rome. But that bloodstained bitch was one of us. She was civilized in her fashion, and not some ignorant Saxon pig-

stealer, or a dog from Jutland who comes hunting enough grain to feed his filthy brood.'

'Luka is merely asking that we heed the warnings, Ector,' Myrddion soothed, although his expression, to the boy's mind, lacked compromise. 'Warned, we are strong; complacent, we are soft in the belly.'

'Rome owns the entire world, including Britannia,' Caius cut in excitedly.

Ector shot a swift glance of disapproval at his only birth son.

'But would the might of Rome come to our aid if we were under attack? I believe they'd leave us to our fate,' Luka replied, with a casual intensity that gave weight to his words.

'Uther Pendragon still holds the south and the west of our land under his foot,' Myrddion answered. 'But he grows old and frightened. God help the west should Uther fail.'

Caius and Ector both snorted. Neither possessed a flattering opinion of the High King who held the tribes to treaties won by bloodshed during his vigorous youth.

'I don't think we should ever discount Uther Pendragon,' Luka added.

'And your villa lies safe because of the protection of his rule,' Myrddion reminded Ector.

'Villa Poppinidii lies strong because it is in my hands,' Ector retorted, his face reddening.

'And very well-provisioned it is too,' Luka soothed. 'I admit I have longed for a civilized bed for many weeks during my travels.'

Somewhat mollified, Ector allowed the conversation to veer on to safer ground, with talk of fashion and trade in the south. Lady Livinia, especially, was starved for tales of civilized Gaul, and she managed to dominate the conversation for some little time, mainly by right of the purity of her breeding.

The three travellers acknowledged Livinia's superior qualities by the deference they showed her. She was small, even for a Roman matron, but her posture was so straight and uncompromising that few visitors noticed her diminutive form. Like all gentle domestic tyrants, she was possessed of great charm and wit, making her a hostess of distinction. Gracefully, she ensured that Myrddion Merlinus and his friends would find nothing amiss in the hospitality of the house.

The boy filled the gilded wine cups from his jugs and listened to the words of the guests with his senses all aquiver.

The third visitor, a dark-complexioned man, remained silent throughout the conversation that swirled around him.

Llanwith poured water into his cup, brushing aside Artorex's proffered wine jug with a flick of his huge beringed hands. His black eyes were watchful and intent, even when the other guests spoke of women's matters, as if the Villa Poppinidii held the answers to secrets he had yet to discover through stealth.

The boy felt his stomach muscles contract with nervousness when the dark-faced man stared covertly at him across the succulent meats and rich sauces. Black eyes forced grey eyes to meet and be examined.

When the honeyed sweetmeats were served, and the men lounged in comfort with the edges of their differences blunted by good food and wine, the silent stranger chose to speak.

'Who is the boy?' he asked in a voice that rumbled from his wide chest. It was a voice of command that demanded an answer.

'He is my foster-son,' Ector replied sleepily. The villa normally held to farm hours, and the water dial showed that the hour was now late.

The boy almost dropped the Spanish wine in surprise as all eyes flickered towards him.

'What is his name, good Ector?'

'Artorex. His name is Artorex.'

'But we call him *Lump*,' Caius giggled drunkenly.

'He bears a noble name. Stand under the wall sconce, young Artorex, where I can see you properly.'

'He's a good enough lad,' Ector mumbled. 'But he's not a sharp dagger, Llanwith pen Bryn, if you take my meaning.'

Llanwith son of Bryn, the boy thought to himself, as he moved to carry out the stranger's bidding. I'll not forget you quickly.

'He is a tall young man. What is his age?'

'Twelve – I believe,' replied Ector carelessly. 'Yes, he makes fair to be strong and large. But why are you so interested in the boy?'

Myrddion Merlinus smiled enigmatically and waved a negligent hand in Artorex's direction. 'Bishop Lucius is curious to know how the child grows. He expected that you'd see to his learning so we may assume he knows some letters. We're simply finishing what was started when we brought the babe to you – how many years ago?'

'It's been too many years, old friend, too many years!' Ector was disposed to be sentimental, but Llanwith was still staring at Artorex as if they were alone in the triclinium.

'Speak for yourself, young Artorex,' Llanwith demanded. 'Are you strong?'

'Aye, master, I'm strong enough,' the boy replied bluntly.

The stranger ignored the boy's effrontery, although Ector frowned in his direction.

'Are you fast, Artorex?' the stranger continued. 'Strong lads are rarely fast.'

Caius giggled.

The boy felt his face flush. He straightened his shoulders and raised his chin.

'Fast enough, master.'



The narrow eating dagger flashed from Llanwith's large hand across the light in a neat parabola that was aimed directly at Artorex's heart.

Unblinkingly, the boy watched the blade arc towards him. Acting on instinct, he moved to one side, and dashed the blade aside with his forearm. The knife clattered to the floor, where it lay like a silver reptile with the dragon aglitter on its hilt.

'Aye, you are fast enough, young man,' Llanwith replied with a laugh as the boy retrieved the dagger and handed it to him, hilt first. 'You bleed, boy.'

'It is only a scratch, master. A nothing.' The boy's face was as inscrutable as the bland features of Llanwith pen Bryn.

The other guests were momentarily robbed of words.

'These are strange dinner manners for an honoured guest, my lord,' Livinia chided. 'If the conversation is to be so surprising, I will leave you for my bed. We keep country hours here, good sirs, and I must supervise the wool bleaching in the morning. Come, Caius, you also would be better served by sleep.'

'I apologize for the want of manners in my friend,' Myrddion replied diplomatically.

Llanwith pen Bryn did not concern himself with words of apology but simply inclined his head towards mother and son with a brief, regal dignity.

As Livinia and a sullen Caius left the chamber with a hiss of sandals on tessellated floors, the mistress paused briefly at the door.

'Don't keep the boy up too late, Ector. I want him fit for work in the morning.'

Ector merely grunted in acknowledgement.

Silence fell after mistress and son departed.

Artorex shuffled awkwardly. He was uncertain how to respond to the visitors, so he stayed in position beneath the scone.

'We now know that the boy is strong and fast,' Luka said conversationally to Ector. 'But does he read? Does he receive an education?'

'Why this interest in Artorex, my friends? I took the lad into my household as a favour to Lucius of Glastonbury when the child was newly born. The priest has never asked for word of him, nor has he shown any interest in the lad since that distant time.'

'I know his history, friend Ector,' Myrddion said. 'But I need to know if the boy can read.'

'Well, yes, he reads as well as can be expected,' Ector growled peevishly. He was unused to being questioned so autocratically in his own house.

'May we judge his ability, my friend?' Luka asked with a conciliatory smile.

The boy was totally bemused by the conversation that was taking place around him. He was conscious that he was being tested, but why? He was just Lump, of little more value than a good hound. In time to come he might be considered worthy of becoming a steward in the place of Cletus, but why should these great ones care a whit for his strength, his speed – or his intelligence?

'Fetch a scroll from my baggage, Artorex,' Llanwith ordered with barely a glance in the boy's direction.

The boy stood, unsure of how to respond, or where to find such an item.

Ector, grumpily, waved a hand at Artorex to indicate that he was to carry out Llanwith's bidding.

The boy ran from the room to seek out Cletus who took charge of all domestic matters. He escaped from the suddenly dangerous room with surprising agility.

Cletus had obviously been eavesdropping for his master's orders, and a kitchen slave had already been sent to the guests'

quarters in the west wing to collect the scroll.

The steward said nothing to the boy, but glared at him suspiciously.

Enclosed in a fine hide case, the scroll was quickly found and thrust into Artorex's hands.

'Obey your masters, boy,' Cletus hissed, and Ector's foster-son slipped back into the dining chamber where the visitors were again speaking of matters in the east.

'Master,' Artorex offered the scroll to Llanwith pen Bryn.

'Read for us, young Artorex. For our entertainment.' The stranger did not even deign to look at him.

Artorex fumbled with the lacings, even clumsier than usual in his nervousness. The scroll was eventually unbound, and the boy stared down at the bold Latin script that marched across the fine hide. He was immediately seized by panic, for the text was totally unfamiliar.

'Read,' Llanwith repeated, his eyes on a stuffed egg speared on the end of his knife.

Haltingly, Artorex began to read the unfamiliar Latin script, becoming faster as he began to recognize more and more words. He had heard of the commentaries of the great Caesar in the Gaul Campaign, but he had never thought to have a copy in his hands.

'I want you to read this scroll and translate it into the common tongue,' Llanwith ordered.

His heart in his mouth, the boy obeyed.

Despite his confusion and fear, Artorex became caught up in the blunt, forthright description of the great Julian's battle campaign.

'Enough!' Llanwith ordered. 'What do you think, Myrddion? You are the scholar amongst us. Does the boy read well?'

Ector was staring at the boy with blank astonishment; there was more depth to his foster-son than he had ever imagined.

'Surprisingly well,' Myrddion replied. 'You are to be congratulated, friend Ector,' he added, turning to face the master of the villa.

'I don't see how, for I never heard him read so well in the past.' Ector may have been a hard man, but he was also bluntly honest.

'Have you read the memoirs of the great Caesar?' Luka asked the boy.

'No, my lord. But I am certain that I would like to do so,' Artorex managed to reply.

'Then keep this small gift, in payment for your diligence,' Llanwith stated casually, as if this strange conversation had been insignificant. 'Now leave the wine jars and get yourself off to bed. That is, if your master will give you leave.'

Ector waved Artorex away, his eyes troubled and gleaming in the light.

Clutching the precious scroll and its case to his chest, Artorex scurried to the door and was gone. Yet some wickedness in his curious nature caused him to pause outside the room and continue to listen. Even though he was aware of the presence of the faithful Cletus at his back, he could not bear to miss the last of the peculiar conversation.

'We have intruded upon your hospitality, friend Ector, but you must believe me when I vow that we would not have imposed on you if our reasons were not of the gravest importance.' Myrddion spoke with a statesman's glibness overlaying a current of urgency.

'Nor can we explain further tonight, Ector,' Luka continued seamlessly. 'Great affairs of state are marching on, old friend, and you and your family are a part of them, whether you will it to be so or not.'

'I don't understand any of this,' Ector grumbled through his beard.

'You must trust us until such time as we can reveal more of what is to come. Twelve years ago, the good Lucius of Glastonbury sent you a gift, and asked you to take care of it. You have done well with that charge,' Llanwith responded gravely.

'Besides,' Myrddion continued, 'perhaps nothing will come of our fears, and you will have an admirable steward to serve your family when you are gone from this world.'

'But it would be profitable for us all if childhood ceases for Artorex at this time,' Luka stated. His companions nodded in agreement. 'We ask that you commence to teach him those skills of the warrior that we ourselves learned as boys, old friend. Blade and shield! Horse and fire! Pain and bravery! Would you undertake such a task for us?'

'Aye, but—'

'And the boy must no longer be referred to as *Lump* by any member of your household,' Llanwith interrupted. 'He will be of no use to us without self-respect.'

Ector recognized the sound of command in the voice of his guest.

As Artorex turned to leave his listening point, he saw Cletus bow his head low. The boy turned. Llanwith pen Bryn was leaning against the doorpost, regarding him with fathomless black eyes.

'Learn your new duties well, boy. And remember that those who listen to private matters can sometimes hear more than they would wish.' Then he grinned at Artorex, and returned to his friends.

'He speaks wise words, young master,' Cletus hissed with frightened respect. 'You could yet get us all hanged if that black-eyed devil has any say in it.'

Artorex ran.

Back in his sleeping cubicle, he tried to chase the faces of the

three strangers from his mind. Nothing had changed. He was still a fatherless son, not much higher than a house slave and only permitted to sleep in the main body of the villa complex on sufferance. He dwelt in the no-man's land of Roman life, a foster-son without status.

Then he reached down and felt the scroll beside his sleeping pallet, and knew that his life was changed forever.